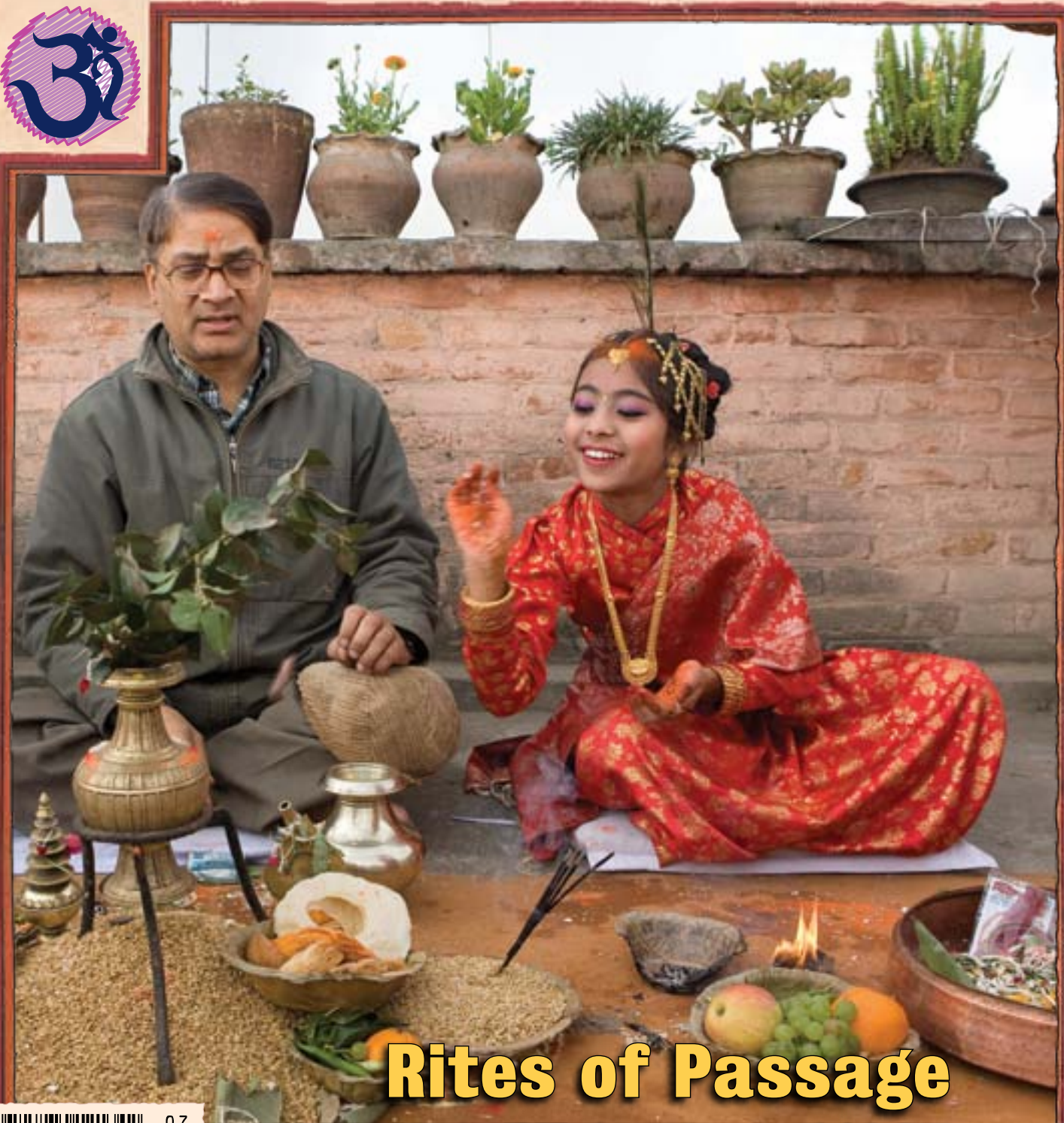


HINDUISM

July/August/September, 2010 US\$7.95



Affirming Sanatana Dharma and Recording the Modern History of a Billion-Strong Global Religion in Renaissance



Rites of Passage

THOMAS KELLY



ALEXANDER VON ROSPATT

Newari girls of Kathmandu undergo rites of passage: (cover) Dipita Phaiju, 11, and priest perform puja in which she is symbolically married to the Sun; (above) girls between age 4-9 celebrate the Ihi ceremony, which enters them fully into their caste and community

JULY/AUGUST/SEPTEMBER, 2010 • HINDU YEAR 5112
VIKITA, THE YEAR OF CHALLENGING CHANGE

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The Radiant Hindus of Mauritius

Spiritual Park, Mauritius:
Thousands attend the monthly homa during which written prayers are burned in the sacred fire. Here four senior kulapatis of Saiva Siddhanta Church preside.

A paradisaic island nation anchored in the Indian Ocean East of Africa, Mauritius is modeling the future for Hindu communities around the globe ... (page 56)

Welcome

TO HINDUISM TODAY'S DIGITAL EDITION!

I am pleased to welcome you to the free digital edition of Hinduism Today magazine. It is the fulfillment of a vision held by my Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, founder of Hinduism Today, to bring the magazine's profound Hindu teachings to the widest possible audience. The text of each issue has long been available on the Web, right back to 1979, but without the photographs and art. Now you have here the entire contents of the printed edition, with all photos and art. Plus, it is interactive—every link is live; click and you go to a web page. You can participate in the magazine in a number of ways, accessed through buttons on the right. And you can help support this free edition in two ways: make an online contribution (even a small one); patronize our specialized advertisers. Explore the resources here, enjoy our latest edition and e-mail us if you are inspired.

Bodhinatha Veylanswami

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GLOBAL DHARMA

INDIA

Ganga Sagar's Shifting Shores

FROM THE MOUTH OF THE Ganges in Bangladesh, going south along the coast to the mouth of the Hoogly River just below Kolkata, facing the Bay of Bengal, is one of the world's most magnificent delta regions. Known as the Sunderbans, "beautiful forest," this area is a UNESCO world heritage site and home of the world's largest mangrove forest. The complex region of waterways, shifting mud flats and small islands protects the interior from raging seas, supports a dense array of wildlife and, increasingly over the past century, human activity. It is now threatened by erosion.

At the Indian southern end of the delta in West Bengal lies the sacred Sagar Island, also known as Ganga Sagar. Each year on Makara Sankranti, when the sun

moves from Capricorn to Sagittarius, a million souls come here to bathe and be cleansed of their past karmas. Some say it is the largest annual gathering in India.

The delicate ecosystem of the Sunderbans, made of silt and clay, is constantly changing. A 2004 study by Girish Gopinath and P. Seralathan showed that 29.8 square kilometers of Sagar had been lost to erosion since 1967. The region has become a focus for claims by global warming theorists that seas are rising.

But locals, while despairing that their farmlands are washing away, don't agree with climate change proponents. In an article published in April in the *Deccan Chronicle*, Ajay Patra, the headman of Ghoramara—an island in the Sunderban chain near Sagar that is likely to wash away



A million faithful take a dip every year at Ganga Sagar, where it is said that King Sagar's sons attained liberation in the last Sat Yuga, when Lord Siva brought Ganga to Earth to wash their ashes

soon—said: "It is not because of global warming. It's because of natural erosion. People settled this island before they should have, the land mass is unstable." In fact, Indians historically stayed off the land, knowing it was unstable. It was a Scot, Sir Daniel Hamilton, who pioneered settlement of Sagar in the late

19th century. Whether it is due to natural erosion or rising seas, the Sunderbans are constantly shifting and various small islands are washing away. Ganga Sagar's shores are changing. It is still high enough above sea level to withstand considerable erosion. For how long? No one knows.

UK

Caste Issues Migrate West

WHILE UK HINDU DHARMA appears jubilant and healthy, behind the scenes the poison of caste discrimination may be undermining UK Indian society. A November 2009 report by the Anti-Caste Discrimination Alliance (ACDA)

revealed that 58% percent of 300 persons surveyed said they have been discriminated against because of their caste. Dalits are the primary victims. Discrimination ranges from verbal abuse to being passed over for promotion and even being refused proper medical treatment by "high caste" doctors. ACDA is trying, so far unsuccessfully, to have the equality bill amended to make caste discrimination illegal.



Diwali in London. One big happy family? Maybe not.



USA

Hindu Youth Focus on Seva, Education

A FRESH NEW HINDU YOUTH group called the "Hindu Students Association" (HSA) in the US Southwest kicked off their activities with a weekend South Region retreat, February 5-7, 2010. Over 90 students from Texas, Arkansas and Arizona gathered in rustic cabins by the lake in Fort Parker State Park in Mexia, Texas. HSA's goals are to bring more religion and knowledge into their service and cultural activities.

The two-day retreat



Hindu students pose with Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami at Fort Parker State Park, Mexia, Texas

comprised a homa conducted by Acharya Praveen Gulati from Houston, student-led discussions and debates and some high level guest speakers that students say made the retreat extra special. Anju Bhargava, a member of President Obama's new Faith Advisory Council, flew in from New Jersey to share her work as a pioneer in

Hindu public service. Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, who HSA's press release described as "renowned for his interaction with Hindu youth," flew from Hawaii to lead discussion groups. Rishi Bhutata from the Hindu American Foundation and Sewa International regional coordinator Vasudev Singh gave the students an eye-opening vision of

work they can do for Hinduism after graduation. It was a powerful beginning for HSA.

Since February, the group has formed new chapters at universities in Houston and Dallas, held a leadership workshop in April, 2010, and conducted a huge event at the University of Arkansas linking religion and classical art forms.



Experts cite unique features in the new-found temples: a rectangle shape, two sets of Sivalingas, and the presence of two altars

INDONESIA

More Siva Temples Unearthed

A RECENTLY DISCOVERED SET of two small Siva linga temples found in Yogyakarta may be, according to some experts, the best-preserved ancient monuments in Java. They were discovered several feet underground at a site next to the mosque of the Islamic University of Indonesia where a new library was planned. The construction crew, finding unstable soil, excavated more deeply and hit on a temple wall. Government archeologists descended, excavating the

site in 35 days to uncover the 1,100-year-old shrines.

"The temples are not big, but they have features that we haven't found in Indonesia before," said Herni Pramastuti, who runs the Archaeological Office. Timbul Haryano, an expert on Hinduism in Southeast Asia said, "Hinduism was Indonesia's main religion for 1,000 years. It's influence is still strong." Indonesia prides itself on the peaceful coexistence of Hinduism and Islam.

AHIMSA

Veggie Kids Stand Tough for Animals

MACLEANS, A CANADIAN magazine, ran an unusual piece in February titled "Militant 7-year-old vegetarians." Carolyn Kuchta's six-year-old daughter became a vegetarian two years ago, becoming so fastidious about it that she would not even eat food that had been touched by utensils used to prepare meat. Daisy Sharrock's daughter Kyna became a vegetarian at five. "It happened suddenly," Daisy says. "Once

she cognitively knew what a bird was and realized this was chicken, she didn't want to eat it." The parents' biggest challenges are teaching tolerance for omnivores while keeping healthy protein intake high.



Awakened children want no part of food sourced by killing



Musicians say the stone horn is "not easy" but plays surprisingly well. Just don't drop it.

MUSIC/SCULPTURE

First Granite Indian Oboe

THE AMAZING SOUTH INDIAN oboe known as "nadaswaram," traditionally made from a special variety of wood, has a piercing sound that touches the spirit. Sculptor Chinna-kkannu used a single piece of hard black granite to make an all-stone version.

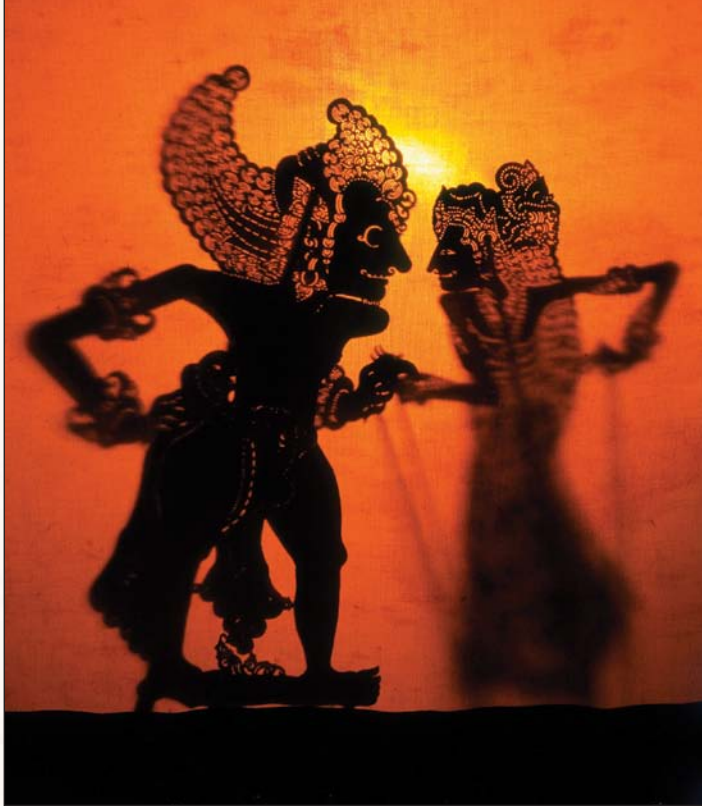
VEGETARIANISM

Filthy Silver Foil in Food

VARAKH, OR ULTRA-THIN silver foil, is used on *mithai*, Indian sweets, and in Ayurvedic preparations such as chyavanprash. *Business India* reported

Cow's skin and intestines are cut into rectangles to form a "book" of pages. Silver is placed between them and beaten to super thin sheets which are used on sweets and in other products.

that Indians eat an astounding 275 tons of silver each year. To produce this much *varakh* requires beating silver between the intestines of 516,000 cows and skins of 17,200 calves. Besides contributing to the death of animals, *varakh* is contaminated with cow flesh and fecal matter. A new mechanical process produces *varakh* without use of animal skin. It is wise to research the source of food silver.



INDIA / INDONESIA / FRANCE

Shadow Puppets Wow France

THE ART OF SHADOW PUPPET theater originated in India and migrated to Indonesia ten centuries ago. The puppets, known as “wayang kulit,” were featured at the Festival de l’Imaginaire in April at The Center of Documentation of World Theater in Vitre (a two-hour drive from Paris). The exhibition ran until May 12th. Through photos, videos, maps and lectures, visitors to Brittany gained insights into the importance and relevance of shadow puppet theater in modern times.

The humorous, captivating Indonesian shadow puppets are of thin leather held by a main rod with controls for the arms

media draws primarily on tales from the *Ramayana* and *Ma-habharata*. In India it begins with the worship of Ganesha. Shows command huge audiences in India and Indonesia.

In Java and Bali, wayang kulit is an advanced art form, with master puppeteers, known as *dalang*, mesmerizing audiences for hours on end. *Dalang* masters are well paid and enjoy high prestige as performing artists. A *dalang* may sit cross-legged for nine hours during their light-and-shadow shows, narrating, manipulating puppets and guiding the gamalan musicians. Because of their endurance and uncanny skill, *dalang* are highly venerated and believed to be endowed with mystical powers.

HERITAGE

Smithsonian US Indian Project Alive

HOMESPUN: THE SMITHSONIAN Indian American Heritage Project is a major initiative by the Smithsonian to showcase Indian American history, contributions and experiences at the Smithsonian Institution, the world’s largest museum and research complex.

There are 2.8 million Indian

Americans, yet their struggle and emergence in the US is largely missing in history and unknown to the general public. *HomeSpun* is planned to include a national traveling exhibition, related public programming, a dedicated website and a middle school curriculum guide, all subject to the availability of materials and funds. The entire project will be made available to the 24 million visitors who come to the Smithsonian annually. After a year, the project is gaining considerable traction, but is still in a fund-raising phase. See: www.homespun.si.edu

BRIEFLY...

GANDHI'S SATYAGRAHA LEGACY

has come to life in the unusual context of the mid-east conflict. Palestinian villagers of the West Bank’s Beit Jala village under the leadership of Ahmad Lazza are training in nonviolent protest against the Israeli occupation. Recent visitors to the area included Martin Luther King III and Gandhi’s grandson Rajmohan, who talked about the

principles and attitudes behind waging a nonviolent struggle.

COURAGEOUS LADIES IN MANIAYA,

Allahabad, India, have defied tradition by taking up the profession of priests who perform last rites. The *Vedas* do not proscribe women from conducting cremations. In cases where the male priest (mahapatra) has died and left no son, daughters

are stepping in as a matter of economic survival. Dressed in saris, the *maharajin buas*, are chanting the *Vedas* and officiating at funeral pyres along the Ganges. After three years of resistance, villagers are accepting the *maharajins* and gradually going to them for related rites, such as *shraddha*.

SCOTLAND'S WARDLAWHILL

Church has been acquired by a 400-family Hindu community in Rutherglen, in the outskirts of Glasgow. It will be trans-

formed into the Sri Sundara Ganapathi Temple. For more information, see: <http://www.hindutempleofscotland.com/>

INDIA'S NEW NATIONAL GREEN

Tribunal, NGT, will be setting up a specialized network of Environment Courts under the National Environment Protection Authority (NEPA). This will make India the first country in the world to give common citizens a specific venue to seek judicial remedies in cases of environmental damage.



Founding members of HomeSpun gather after the fund-raising dinner in February, 2009, where US\$92,500 was raised in donations and pledges. The current fund-raising drive is for \$2 million.



HINDUISM TODAY was founded on January 5, 1979, by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami (1927–2001). It is a nonprofit educational activity of Himalayan Academy, with the following purposes: 1. To foster Hindu solidarity as a unity in diversity among all sects

and lineages; 2. To inform and inspire Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism; 3. To dispel myths, illusions and misinformation about Hinduism; 4. To protect, preserve and promote the sacred *Vedas* and the Hindu religion; 5. To nurture and monitor the ongoing spiritual Hindu renaissance; 6. To publish resources for Hindu leaders and educators who promote Sanatana Dharma. Join this *seva* by sending letters, clippings, photographs, reports on events and by encouraging others.



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IN MY OPINION

The Case for Hindu Pluralism

How I came to understand the value of our religion's seemingly competing points of view

BY ARVIND SHARMA

I DISCOVERED THE LOGIC OF Hindu pluralism, to begin with, not so much rationally as experientially. This is how it happened. At the time I was teaching in the Department of Studies in Religion at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, Australia. When I visited Brisbane last year, it was bristling with modernity, but when I began teaching there in 1976, it had the unenviable reputation of being the backwaters of Australia. Be that as it may, the religious liberals in Brisbane felt that they were in a minority and proposed, after my arrival, that we all meet on a weekly basis. I was glad to be part of it, and regarded it as a satsang.

When, after some presentations, the group felt itself to be at a loss for topics—at least momentarily—I proposed that each member share an account of his or her moral, ideological and spiritual journey through life, or as I put it more racy, “expose themselves.” I hope it was not entirely due to the sexy metaphor in which the request was couched that the proposal was not only received, but also implemented with great enthusiasm. When, at the end of these presentations, I reviewed these close to fifteen wonderfully rich and candid accounts, I was struck by a curious but striking fact.

Despite their enormous diversity, they shared one feature in common: Everyone had gradually tended to move in a direction opposite to one’s original orientation as each had progressed through life. That is to say—if one started out as a believer in God, one had begun to develop doubts on the score as one moved through life; if one was an atheist to begin with, one had become more open to the possible existence of Providence. Those who began by believing only in the ultimate existence of matter were no longer certain that this was an undeniable truth, and had become more open to the possibility of life possessing a spiritual dimension.

Those who believed in living life in accordance with a strict moral code had become



more aware of the need for charity in observing them, while those who were moral relativists to begin with now begun to see some merit in the norms of conventional morality. Those who had started as conservatives had begun to warm up to the comforts of liberalism. Those who had started out as liberals had developed an appreciation of the conventional wisdom of

conservatism. And so on.

This made me coin a line, which, I felt somewhat egoistically, could well have found a place in the Tao Te Ching: “Opposite is the movement of the Tao.” This tentative formulation received a surprising endorsement at a conference just ahead of the Parliament of World’s Religions, when it met in Barcelona in 2004. One of the speakers was about to share the experience of their group with the religious autobiographies of its members, when time ran out. On an impulse I just got up and said: “Before you go, did all the members of your group move in a direction opposite to...” He stared back at me in disbelief, as he said, somewhat taken aback: “You got it.”

This experience, combined with my previous one at Brisbane, has made me look at Hindu pluralism in a new, and perhaps more profound, light. Hinduism’s diverse theologies, philosophies and approaches to life may result from an understanding that life is simply too complex, protean, dynamic and multi-faceted a phenomenon to be capable of being captured by a single model or paradigm forever. A Hindu whose spiritual understanding evolves and changes over his life is unlikely to be pushed beyond the boundaries of his multi-faceted faith, as happened with several in my Brisbane satsang who came from religions with a more narrow focus.

ARVIND SHARMA is Birks Professor of Comparative Religion, McGill University, Montreal, Canada

Letting Go of Past & Future

A peaceful and effective life is waiting for those who undertake the not-so-easy work required to live in the eternal now

BY SATGURU BODHINATHA VEYLANSWAMI

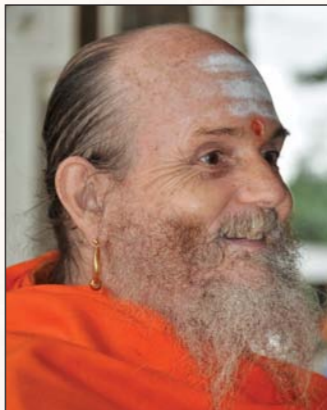
MANY INDIVIDUALS FIND THAT WHEN THEY sit down to meditate their mind is constantly thinking about past and future events. They find that their mental power is seriously dispersed rather than being intensely focused. Though less obvious, this can also happen when we visit a temple. My guru, Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, gives an insightful description of this phenomenon. "How many times have you gone to the temple without being fully there? Part of you was there, part of you was living in the past, part of you was trying to live in the future; and there you were, emoting over the things that happened that should never have happened, and fearful of things that might happen in the future, which probably won't happen unless you continue being fearful of their happening until you create them!"

Focusing the mind, controlling our thoughts, is clearly central to successful meditation. The fact that Patanjali chose this subject for the first sutra of his *Yoga Sutras* affirms its centrality to the meditative process: "Yoga is restraining the mind stuff from taking various forms." Beyond helping us be successful in meditation, a focused mind benefits us in other ways. With a focused mind, we will be more successful in our outer activities at work and at school. Another plus is that a focused mind is a peaceful, contented mind. From that peaceful platform we can turn within and more easily contact our intuition, our superconscious mind, the inner voice, and benefit from the wisdom and creativity it provides.

A good way to measure the level of mental distraction you are experiencing is to walk outdoors with young children. They will always notice many more details of the surroundings than you because their minds are not yet drawn to past and future concerns. Having established the goal—a focused mind, a mind that is not constantly wandering into the past and future—what are some specific techniques we can apply to harness our thoughts?

Keeping up to Date with the Past: Let's look first at how we can conquer unnecessary thoughts about the past. Often we think about past events because they are not resolved. They are events that we do not fully understand or accept. Reconciling the past gives freedom and clarity, as Patanjali explained: "As soon as all impurities have been removed by the practice of spiritual disciplines—the limbs of yoga—a man's spiritual vision opens to the light-giving knowledge of the Atman."

It is helpful to distinguish between recent unresolved events and those that happened some time ago. The subconscious mind will for some weeks throw up or present recent events to the conscious mind many times a day. This is a clear indication that an experience is unresolved. After a few weeks, the subconscious will stop its frequent reminders and suppress the experience. Suppressed



experiences accumulate in the subconscious, creating an anxious, troubled nature.

It is good, therefore, to act to resolve each experience while this reminding process is going on rather than to simply wait it out and forget about the happening. It often works to seek a resolution to the matter by discussing it with those involved. If we have hurt the feelings of others, an apology may be appropriate. If our feelings have been hurt, then we may need to forgive others. In such ways, the emotional component of the experience can be defused and the matter resolved.

Unresolved experiences that happened some time ago will also come to mind, but less frequently than recent ones. It is usually no longer appropriate to apologize or seek apology, as the other parties would not understand why we are bringing up the matter after such a long time. A good alternative is to write down anything from your past that concerns you and burn the paper, holding the intent that the memory will be neutralized. If you are successful with your subconscious journaling, you will still remember, but without the attending emotions.

Resolving the past may be more of a challenge than one expects. A common problem is an inability to forgive someone—such as an abusive father—for how they treated us. A helpful philosophical approach is to focus on the law of karma by affirming that Something we did in the past caused those experiences to come to us in the present. Our father was simply the means through which that karma was experienced. Rather than continuing the unproductive pattern of blaming him, we can inwardly thank him for providing us the opportunity to face our difficult karmas. It is amazing how a simple change in our attitude toward such a thing can transform our reaction to it.

Reining in the Future: How can we conquer unnecessary thoughts, especially negative anticipations, of the future? Many such thoughts fall into the category of worry. We are concerned that certain events may happen, sometimes to the extent of becoming fearful. A remedy that Gurudeva stressed is to employ a simple affirmation. When the mind starts to worry, say to yourself, "I'm all right, right now." Keep repeating this affirmation until you are convinced that everything is fine in the present moment.

Mulling over major decisions is another type of concern about the



future. A common practice is to ponder the decision often but without thinking it through and reaching a conclusion, instead jumping each time to another topic. Hence, it becomes a source of worry. An effective way to dispatch the matter is to make a formal appointment with yourself at a time you are free to focus on it fully—for example, 10am on Saturday morning. If you find yourself mulling it over before then, discipline your mind by affirming, "I have an appointment on Saturday to decide this matter, and therefore there is no need to think about it right now."

These and other techniques can be used to focus the mind in the present rather than dwelling on the past or the future. Once the strong pulls of past and future have been subdued, we can concentrate on reducing the miscellaneous thoughts about current concerns, such as plans for the day or the news we saw on TV last night. These can be restrained by practicing pranayama, breath control. A simple, effective technique is to breathe in for nine counts, hold for

Present, past or future? Three men represent states of mind people dwell in. One lives regretfully in the past, recalling poor childhood days when father drove a bullock cart. Another lives anxiously in the future, worrying about what may come. A third abides in the eternal now, serene, secure and centered.

one count, breathe out for nine counts and hold for one count. After breathing in this way for a few minutes, your thinking process will naturally calm down.

When we manage to center our mind in the present and quiet the cacophony of miscellaneous thoughts, we experience a higher state of consciousness. Gurudeva refers to this as the eternal now: "The mind lives in the past, and the mind tries to live in the future. But when you quiet your mind, you live in the present. You are living within your soul, or the higher state of your mind which is undisturbed by the things of time."

The Mountaintop Perspective: One of the abilities available to us once we have freed ourselves of vexations of past and future is to clearly see patterns in our life, and in the lives of others. It is the proverbial state of being able to see the forest instead of the trees. In his early teaching years Gurudeva cultivated this ability by taking his devotees on pilgrimage each month to the top of a nearby mountain from which they could look down on the cities below. This practice was helpful in developing the skill of perceiving the overview.

An example of a typical mental pattern that can be seen and then improved upon is the habit of making a decision to pursue a project but then giving it up when the first major obstacle is encountered. Once this tendency to quit is perceived, we can work to create a new habit of persevering in our endeavors even when faced with obstacles. A second example is the tendency to make resolves to increase our spiritual practices, sadhanas, but then relinquishing our commitment after spending time with nonreligious friends. This problem can be overcome by spending more time with spiritual friends and less time with naysayers.

Another benefit that comes from living in the eternal now is the ability to turn within and feel the spiritual power within the spine. There is a dynamic force there that, when experienced, gives us renewed inspiration and positiveness. When we are feeling a bit discouraged, we can find new energy and enthusiasm to meet the tasks at hand by quieting our thoughts and tuning in to this spiritual force felt along the spine.

Let me share a final insight from Gurudeva on experiencing the eternal now: "Can you visualize yourself, right at this instant, balanced on the top of a tall tree? If the tree were to bend too far forward, you would fall to the ground, or down into time and thought. If it were to bend too far back, you would again fall. Balanced on the top of this tree, you can look out over the countryside and enjoy everything you see. But if you stop to think about one thing of the past, you would become so engrossed in what you are thinking about that you again fall to the ground. You find that you cannot live in a thinking consciousness balanced so high. Here you live in the eternal now, with great awareness of what is around you and within you, but with no thought on it."



LETTERS

Thanks for Festival Issue

I must tell you how thrilled I am to receive the April/May/June issue of HINDUISM TODAY, just a couple of days ago, featuring 15 of our holy days. Needless to say, this "Magazine for the Generations" is the crown jewel, making all Hindus proud of their heritage. It is very fulfilling for me and my wife that our contribution of one dollar a day in perpetuity supports some minute but nonzero part of each issue of this magazine of infinite wisdom for generations to come. Today I am even more grateful because I am enjoying this magazine.

NARAYANA RAO
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Congratulations once again on your current issue: the presentation of festivals is outstanding. Thank you also for the materials you have prepared about Hinduism for the media. In that respect, you may want to take a look at a feature that comes up now and then on the MSNBC website on the world's major religions. Hinduism, in my humble opinion, is incorrectly represented. Perhaps they would appreciate some updated and corrected input? In addition to festivals, the yamas and niyamas seem like an inspiring introduction to Hinduism, and to yoga in particular. One of my friends, a truly admirable Quaker lady, read these and was quite surprised; she said she didn't think she could live up to such high standards.

MARIANNA MARTIN
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Thanks

I received my copy of HINDUISM TODAY yesterday, and I just wanted to say how wonderful it is. Even though there is so much information on the web, holding the beautifully typeset pages is something special. It gives a real sense of connection with the wider Hindu community. As I live a long way from a Saivite temple, it is a connection with other Saivites. There are always wonderful, inspirational articles. I read Alok Lathi's words "Simply having HINDUISM TODAY on your shelf is a blessing even if you don't read it!" I think he could be right, the devotion of the monks does infuse the words. It's even better if you do read it, though!

CHRIS BROOKING
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Please accept my heartfelt appreciation and love of the HINDUISM TODAY magazine and

books such as *Dancing with Siva*. Teaching World Religions at a community college in Chicago, I have seen that misunderstandings related to Hinduism are rampant. It is great to know that organizations like yours are helping to de-mystify misunderstandings and emphasizing the true beauty of Hinduism, while keeping the message of positivity and unity at the forefront.

SRUJESH SHAH
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HINDUISM TODAY is just awesome. This is exactly what Hinduism needs in order to educate the world.

SRINIVAS
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Hindu "Stamps" Misleading

The headline "Hindu Gods on US postage stamp" [HPI, February 2, 2010] is misleading. It is just a business gimmick. Anyone can get those stamps printed. The company who prints them is not located in Atlanta. It is located in California. It is not new. This company was printing stamps long ago. If you like, you can put any photo and get a stamp made. But you will end up paying more than double the face value. Here is the link if you want to get your own stamps with the photos you like. <http://photo.stamps.com/Store/company/contact/>

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Admirable History

I received your package (Hinduism Endures 1100 to 1850). I just finished reading it. I am really impressed by the presentation, which summarizes admirably such a long period in few short pages—a fact-filled work that is easy to read. It is also badly needed for the Hindu community, if one can bring them to read it. Are there any plans for a massive dissemination of this brochure (and the previous two chapters as well)?

I have just a few comments, not as a criticism but some information that may have been overlooked or missed by the author: 1. Akbar's successors were intolerant because of the pressure from Mullahs who detested Akbar's tolerant policies which were against Quran. These Mullahs railed against Akbar's policies and also often incited rebellion from provincial governors against any ruler who followed religiously tolerant policies. 2. Two Sikh gurus were executed by Mughal emperors. The first, who died in Mughal emperor Jahangir's prison, was Guru Arjan (1563–

1606); the second, executed by Aurangzeb, was Guru Tegh Bahadur (1621–1675). The author has mentioned only Tegh Bahadur.

It is possible that the author ignored some of this information to avoid unwelcome and distracting controversy. All said, this is a splendid work for the level it is intended to.

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The Gateway of India was built to commemorate the arrival in 1911 of King George V and Queen Mary. Only the foundation was laid when they arrived; the actual structure was built later and completed in 1924.

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Chidambaram Temple

I would like to share my views on the issue of the status of the temples in Tamil Nadu and the management takeover of Chidambaram temple. The present Chief Minister of the Government of Tamil Nadu is proud to call himself an atheist and has been a strong critic of Hindu culture and Hindu religious practices. The leaders of his party and their mentors of Dravidar Kazhagam have been strong critics of Hindu religious practices and Hindu culture. Members of the temple management boards are mostly politicians who have a strong desire to swindle public property. Thousands of Hindu temples have come under their control, without any investment from the government or from the politicians. Most of the old temples have enormous wealth, like cultivable lands and precious jewelry. It is no secret that the political bosses desire to have control over the enormous wealth of the temples rather than to give proper upkeep of the premises and provide the proper spiritual atmosphere for devotees.

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Are Paths Many?

I've read the statement "Truth is One, Paths are Many" several times in your magazine, but I wonder if Hindus really truly believe this without any additional qualifiers. I am not a Hindu, but a Christian, and have been reading your magazine to learn more about Hinduism. Your magazine is very informative, and the best religious magazine I have read. I support your purpose of informing and inspiring Hindus worldwide and people interested in Hinduism, and in protecting and preserving your religion. By all means, be

proud of your religion, educate others about it and raise up your children in your faith.

However, as a person from outside the Hindu worldview, some things that I have read in your magazine are puzzling. A writer of a letter in your April/May/June 2010 issue titled "Stop Conversion" wrote, "...Intermarriage should only be accepted if the Christian boy or girl agrees to embrace Hinduism." If Hindus truly believe "Truth is One, paths are many," without any additional qualifiers, then it really shouldn't matter what path one chooses to embrace. Why demand a conversion to Hinduism?

As I understand it, Hindus believe all scriptures are part of the One truth but belong to different yet valid paths. Do Hindus believe the Bible is wrong, in error or being misinterpreted when it says to preach the gospel to all nations?

I was appalled to read about the lawsuit by the Hindu American Foundation against the Ten Commandments display in Austin. It was heartening, however, to see that the article actually pointed out several significant and problematic differences between Christianity and Hinduism. When Christians bring up such differences they are usually labeled intolerant. However, you can only be tolerant of something you have a difference of opinion with. We can agree to disagree and don't have to resort to legal action which seems to me intolerant. If I were living in India and a similar situation existed, I would never consider bringing legal action to change a monu-

ment related to the established religious/political system.

The essence of the wording captured on the monument is taken from the Bible that Christian's believe is the holy and inspired Word of God. The article stated that this wording "directly conflicts" with and "cannot be squared" with Hindu theology.

Truth by its very nature is exclusive—exclusive of error. Do Hindus believe the Christian Bible is wrong—in error—in the way it states the Ten Commandments? I believe they do, based upon the comments from the article in your magazine. You may say that religions can contradict each other without being a problem, or they are only able to describe a part of the elephant so to speak, but this is your viewpoint that's not accepted by many in other religious faiths.

"Truth is One, paths are many." I personally don't believe this, but it doesn't mean I'm intolerant. I have friends of various religious beliefs from countries around the world, and am tolerant of what they believe. Tolerance doesn't mean agreement. If Hindus truly believe "Truth is One, paths are many" without any additional qualifiers, then it really shouldn't matter what path one chooses to follow. This would apply to their children and family as well. However, the article titled "Raising Children as Good Hindus," in your May/June/July 2005 issue, said, "The correct teaching is that Hindus believe that all religions worship the same truth, the same Supreme Being. However, this does not mean

that all religions are identical and that it doesn't matter which religion you follow".

Based on this statement, it does seem to matter which religion you follow. From an outsider looking in based on reading your magazine it sounds more like, "Truth is One, paths are many, and Hinduism is definitely the best path to be followed." As a Christian I would disagree with a statement such as that, and so would many other religious faiths.

I did not write this to be argumentative, but to express the beliefs and opinions of one who shares a different worldview. I thank you again for an excellent and informative magazine that I look forward to reading more issues of in the future.

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Corrections

✓ Seven photos in the gatefold of last issue and two in *Global Dharma of the Parliament of the World's Religions* were taken by A.P. Guruswamy and unfortunately not credited.

Letters with writer's name, address and daytime phone number should be sent to:

Letters, Hinduism Today
107 Kaholalele Road
Kapaa, Hawaii, 96746-9304 USA
or faxed to: (808) 822-4351
or submitted at: www.hinduismtoday.com

Letters may be edited for space and clarity and may appear in electronic versions of HINDUISM TODAY.

Bringing Answers to Seeking Souls

How you can help spread the most precious knowledge

“THE MOST URGENT NEED HINDUS have is for genuine understanding, the kind that helps you make sense out of your life,” Srikanth Kannan, of Hyderabad, India, explained to our editors, recently. “I see so many youth here, in India, who will not call themselves Hindus. They are embarrassed because they can't explain themselves. They may have spiritual longings but, sadly, they reject the very thing that holds the answers they crave.”

Srikanth, a professor of management, has taught at universities in Europe, US and India. In 2000, he met HINDUISM TODAY's founder, Gurudeva, and immediately the guru said, “Here!” and handed him a copy of the magazine. “That began, for me, a long journey of understanding which continues to this day. The magazine brought me clarity, insight and the

practice of daily sadhana. I learned to be more peaceful, to control my life and appreciate my faith more deeply, based now on solid personal experience. I believe this is the way to quell all those questions the youth have. I occasionally encourage someone to do as I did: read HINDUISM TODAY and do sadhana consistently over a long time. It's well worth the effort.”

Kannan explains that there is a “community” of Hindu souls living all around the world who share a tendency toward spirituality, but have lost contact with the source and have no idea where to start. “HINDUISM



“Understanding leading to personal experience is the key.” Srikanth Kannan of Hyderabad.

TODAY is aware of that community and speaks to them, telling them they are not alone. To me, that is the magazine's most valuable service.”

Kannan has given generously to the Hinduism Today Production Fund which is a part of Hindu Heritage Endowment—to reach out to that community, and make youth proud to be Hindus again, having experienced their faith's power to transform life and brighten their days.”

If, like Srikanth, you would like to disseminate understanding where it matters most, please consider donating to the Production Fund or including it in your estate plan. Ask to receive our Production Fund e-newsletter at www.gurudeva.org/email-news. Or visit www.hheonline.org/productionfund. Or contact us at 1-808-634-5407 or hhe@hindu.org.

QUOTES & QUIPS

Your actions express your priorities.

Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948)

If you must be mad, be it not for the things of the world. Be mad with the love of God. **Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa** (1836–1886)

Bliss is the dance-stage, bliss is the lyric; Bliss are the diverse instruments, Bliss is the meaning; The supreme felicity of the universe is bliss, For he who yearns for His dance of bliss. **Tirumantiram** a sacred mystical treatise by Rishi Tirumular, verse v. 2725

When I think of myself as a body, I am your servant, my Lord; when I think of myself as an individual soul, I am part of you; but

when I realize I am atman, you and I become one. **Hanuman** in the epic Ramayana

A great thing about being an archeologist is that you are always doing ground-breaking research. *Anonymous*

All differences in this world are of degree, and not of kind, because oneness is the secret of everything. All is God. But you cannot believe in God until you believe in yourself. **Swami Vivekananda** (1863–1902), disciple of Sri Ramakrishna

The Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of wonderful structure, more

perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either. **Sir William Jones** (1746–1794), English philologist, the first to propose Indo-European as a common root between these languages

Go beyond science, into the region of metaphysics. Real religion is beyond argument. It can only be lived simultaneously inwardly and outwardly. **Swami Sivananda** (1887–1963), founder of the Divine Life Society, Rishikesh

To later generations of the faithful, what was written in fluctuating circumstances has assumed the status of immutable truth. To suggest that supernatural stories are allegorical can be considered a radical position in even the most liberal precincts of the Christian world. Yes, faith requires a willing suspension of disbelief; I do it myself all the time. But that is a different thing from the suspension of reason and critical intelligence—faculties that tell us that something is not necessarily the case simply because it is written down somewhere or repeated over and over. **Jon Meacham**, American journalist, Editor of Newsweek

People fight for religion, die for religion, but rarely follow religion. *Anonymous*

Be as you wish to seem. **Socrates**, (470–399 BCE) Greek philosopher

This body of mine brought seeds with it. Illness is one of them. Activity passes on and so does the body. Of what concern is it to us? All this was settled long ago. Don't be afraid of anything. **Satguru Siva Yogaswami** (1872–1964), Sri Lankan mystic

There are three rules to live a serene life: be kind, be kind, be kind. **Henry James** (1843–1916), American-born English writer

When one teaches, two learn. *Anonymous*

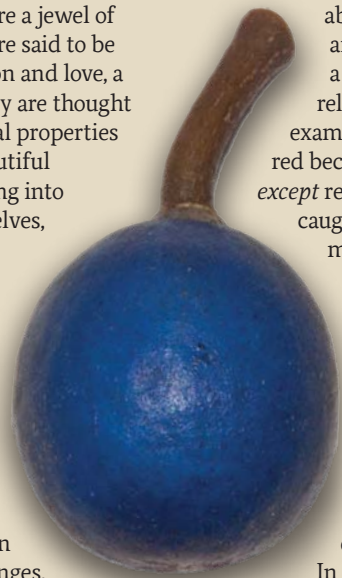
DID YOU KNOW?

The Magical Color of Rudrakshas

SACRED FOR MANY REASONS, rudraksha fruits are a jewel of Hinduism. They are said to be Siva's tears of compassion and love, a symbol of his grace. They are thought to have several medicinal properties and the remarkably beautiful seeds, once dry, are strung into malas. The trees themselves, so the tradition goes, only grow in places favored by Lord Siva.

To hold a rudraksha fruit in your hands is to be intrigued by its otherworldly color. It is a hue unseen in any other part of nature, a cobalt blue fused with indigo that seems to turn to violet as the light changes.

Scientists have an explanation for this almost iridescent tint. Rudraksha skins are colored through refraction of light, not reflection, a singular phenomenon in the plant world.



In most materials, light is absorbed as energy and then, an infinitesimal fraction of a second later, some of it is released back. A red cup, for example, is perceived by us as red because it absorbs all light except red—which is reflected and caught by our eyes. White materials are white because they reflect the whole light spectrum equally. Rudrakshas, however, do not parse light to then reflect it. Instead, its amazing structure splits light rays open, in the same way a crystal prism or rain drops create rainbows. In this process, called refraction, light touches

our eyes in a myriad of rays that we perceive as rudraksha's unique shade of blue—which can only be seen on the fruit and not on this printed page.

Frank and Ernest

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Peace has three dimensions. Peace within ourselves, peace among nations and peace with nature. **Dada J.P. Vaswani**, head of the Sadhu Vaswani Mission

A conservative is a man who sits and thinks, mostly sits. **Woodrow Wilson**, (1856–1924), U.S. President

The cultured give happiness wherever they go. The uncultured whenever they go. *Anonymous*

Take care of other's needs, and your needs will be taken care of; take care of other's prosperity, and your prosperity will be taken care of; take care of other's moksha, and your

moksha will be taken care of. Serve the poor; feed the hungry, care for the sick, go from door to door to see what their problems are. This is the only path to peace. These are the commands of all spiritual masters. There is nothing else you need to know. The secret lies simply in implementation. **Swami Satyananda Saraswati** (1923–2009), disciple of Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh

The contemplation of celestial things will make a man both speak and think more sublimely and magnificently when he descends to human affairs. **Marcus Tullius Cicero** (106–43 BCE), Roman statesman

The good-and-bad concept should be thrown out with a lot of other things, including the up-and-down concept. There is no good; there is no bad. You don't raise your consciousness, nor do you lower it. These are just concepts that have come in by various philosophers who tried to explain these deeper teachings the very best that they could. What is bad is good, and what is good is good. And a higher state of consciousness and a lower state of consciousness, they don't exist at all. We simply hold a certain perspective of awareness, and we look out, and we go in. **Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami** (1927–2001), founder of HINDUISM TODAY

BASICS OF HINDUISM

Hinduism and Other Religions

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS ARE AS MANIFOLD as they are different. Hindus, understanding the strength of this diversity, wholeheartedly respect and encourage all who believe in God. They honor the fact that Truth is one, paths are many.

Since the inner intent of all religions is to bind man back to God, the devout Hindu seeks not to interfere with anyone's faith or practice. We believe that there is no exclusive path, no one way for all. Hindus profoundly know that He whom we call God is the same Supreme Being in whom peoples of all faiths find solace, peace and liberation.

Nonetheless, we realize that all religions are not the same. Each has its unique beliefs, practices, goals and paths of

attainment, and the doctrines of one often conflict with those of another. Conversion, when it happens, must be a result of profound soul-searching and follow rigorous ethical guidelines.

But differences should never be cause for religious tension or intolerance. Hindus respect all religious traditions and the people within them. They know that good citizens and stable societies are created from groups of religious people. Leaders of our faith support and participate in ecumenical gatherings with all religions.

Still, Hindus defend their faith, proceed contentedly with their practices and avoid the

enchantment of other ways, be they ancient or modern. The Vedas impel, "Let us have concord with our own people, and concord with people who are strangers to us. Ashvins, create between us and the strangers a unity of hearts."



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Response to Lesson 3

I am impressed with the sincere honesty and frankness expressed in the text regarding the tragic violence of invasion, conquest and colonization of India. I particularly like the message of cultural persistence and continuity that this history conveys. This pamphlet also wonderfully recognizes the ability of school children to grasp true meanings in history and culture. Sometimes we omit too much information from our children in our desire to protect them; doing so harms them and disrespects their intellect. **Michael K. Ward, PhD**, Visiting Lecturer in History, California State University, Northridge



FROM THE AGAMAS

A Meditation on Oneness with Siva

Excerpts from a uniquely lucid ancient text on the unity of God and soul

The following text is from the section on knowledge of Sarvajnanottara Agama. It deals with gaining a correct understanding of the true relationship between the meditator and Lord Siva. The Agama is told to Lord Skanda by Siva Himself.

SKANDA! NEXT I WILL EXPLAIN A SPECIFIC MEDITATIVE DISCIPLINE in all its real characteristics. By practicing this specific discipline, the Supreme Reality which is subtle, which is within the heart of every being and which is eternally free from the association of the entire range of tattvas could be perfectly known even though it is incomprehensible to the human senses. One who knows this specific discipline attains identical existence with Lord Siva. So far this supreme discipline has not been revealed to anybody. Now listen to the instruction on this supreme science of meditation as transmitted from Me.

This supreme discipline has been coming down through the continued lineage of the guru from time immemorial. This is incomprehensible to all those who are affiliated to various systems, both religious and philosophical. This has been formulated for the attainment of complete liberation from the repeated phenomena of birth and death. This is supreme in its kind and concerned with the ultimate benefit of all the souls.

Let the highly refined seeker meditate on Lord Siva in this way, with his mind completely free from modifications and differentiations effected by the limiting bonds: "This Lord Siva who shines forth within the heart of all beings, who is self-luminous, who presents Himself as all souls, worlds and worldly objects, who creates and directs all the tattvas, who is of the nature of all the tattvas evolved by Him from the maya, who is inconceivable, who exists in the highest transcendental plane which is beyond the range of all other planes occupied by other Gods and who transcends all the tattvas from the Siva tattva to the prithivi tattva, is verily beyond the reach of speech, mind and name. Such a Lord is indeed myself."

That which is formless, which is of the nature of supreme consciousness, which is eternally existing, which is in eternal abode, which is eternally free from the constricting bonds, which is free from mutations, which is indescribable, which is beyond the possibilities of illustrative reasons and parables, which is beyond the classification of genders (male, female and neuter), which is indestructible, which is free from likes and dislikes, which is absolutely beyond the knowable and definable existents, which is inconceivable and whose transcendental existence cannot be doubted is really myself. There is no doubt about this identity.

He who is the supreme Lord, who is of the nature of all mantras, who is one with absolute auspiciousness and purity, who is beyond the entire range of mantras and who is free from the cosmic phenomena of manifestation and absorption is indeed myself. All this world constituted of the seen and the unseen, of the moveable and immovable existents, is pervaded by me. I myself am the Lord of the world. Only from Me all things emerge, flourish and proliferate. The entire range of worlds variegated with innumerable formed objects, all the tattvas from Siva to prithivi in which these worlds of variegated forms exist—all these have their existence only in me.



Dance of Siva: Lord Siva dancing, accompanied by Nandi and Ganesha, a painting in Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu

Even those insignificant things which are actually seen and even those which are heard to have their existence, differentiated as exterior objects and interior objects—all are pervaded by me.

"I am the individual self. Siva who is considered to be the Supreme Self is different from me." He who contemplates in this way being under the spell of ignorance and infatuation will never attain the exalted qualities of Lord Siva characterized by the power of all knowing and that of all doing. "Siva is different from me. Actually I am different from Siva." The highly refined seeker should avoid such sort of vicious notion of difference.

"He who is Siva is indeed myself." Let him always contemplate this non-dual union between Siva and himself.

DR. S. P. SABHARATHNAM SIVACHARYAR, 67, of the Adisaiva priest lineage, is an expert in ancient Tamil and Sanskrit, specializing in the *Vedas*, *Agamas* and *Silpa Shastras*. This excerpt is from his recently completed translation of the revered *Sarvajnanottara Agama*.

The Vedas and Agamas are the divinely revealed and most revered scriptures, shruti, of Hinduism, likened to the Torah (1200 BCE), Bible New Testament (100 CE), Koran (630 CE) or Zend Avesta (600 BCE). The oldest portions of the Vedas may date back as far as 6,000 bce. The Saiva Agamas are also ancient, but dating is uncertain.

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Nepal Style

Rites of Passage

THOMAS KELLY

Dressed as a Hindu bride for her coming-of-age ceremony, 11-year-old Dipita Phaiju blesses the road home after darshan of Lord Ganesha at a nearby temple



The Newars are the indigenous people of Nepal's Kathmandu Valley. Most are Hindus. Their rites of passage are central to their strong social and religious traditions. These ceremonies express and celebrate the importance of the major landmarks of human life, including birth, first feeding and coming of age. Writer Ellen Coon came to Kathmandu as a Fulbright scholar in 2004 to study Newar ritual practice and concepts of feminine divinity. Over the years, she has developed a rich network of Newar friends and teachers who have generously explained their beliefs and way of life to her and even allowed her to share in their personal family observances.

BY ELLEN COON, KATHMANDU

IN KATHMANDU, WE ARE REMINDED constantly of how religion binds us to place and to each other. Everywhere there is evidence of worship, from vermilion and rice grains sprinkled at the stone in front of the entrance to a home, to rice pudding lovingly offered into the mouth of the neighborhood Ganesha, to the unexpected procession in which a gold-swathed baby, a shaven-headed boy in a loincloth or a magnificently dressed elder in a palanquin is paraded through the neighborhood to celebrate entrance into a new stage of life.

These are some of the "ten karmas" or life-cycle rituals—*samskaras* in Sanskrit—practiced by the Newars. Newars don't all agree about what the ten karmas are, but they do agree on their importance. "We call it *karma konkyu*, or making them see karma," one

grandmother explained. "You could also say we are giving them their karma. When we do the ritual, we are praying, 'May you take the right path. May you always be in the right place. We are teaching you right from wrong. You are one of us.'"

The ten karmas are observed by both the Newar Hindus (85%) and Newar Buddhists, as these religious traditions are historically intertwined in the Kathmandu Valley. A local joke is that on a personal basis a Newar is "60% Hindu and 60% Buddhist." These rites, therefore, may be performed by either a Hindu or Buddhist priest (even for a Hindu family), with some practical and philosophical differences.

Of the ten karmas, I describe the seven most common, all of which I've seen first hand: blessing the baby, first feeding, *ih*i for girls, coming of age for girls and for boys, marriage and honoring one's elders. The remaining three are also for elders, but rare.

Greeting the Newly Born Soul

Birth is a powerful and dangerous time for a family, when everyday life is disrupted and the possibility of death lingers at the gate. In Newar families, the new mother is secluded in a darkened room with her baby. She does not bathe, nor comb her hair, nor look in the mirror. Her food is brought to her without salt. In the rest of the house, nobody does puja or goes to a party. Central to the birth process is the *aji*. The *aji* is both midwife and priestess. In addition to providing excellent postpartum care, she invokes the protective influence of Chwaasa Ajima, the

Goddess in charge of childbirth. The *aji* also performs the baby's first life-cycle rite, *macha bu benkyu*. Conducted between four and twelve days after birth, this ritual formally introduces the newborn to its family and ends the mother's confinement.

These days, most Newar mothers give birth in the hospital, but their families still observe birth restrictions when the mother and baby return home. Just as before, the midwife must come to conduct the *macha bu benkyu* ritual, for without the blessings of Chwaasa Ajima, the baby could suffer endless crying bouts and fail to thrive.

I was invited to observe a recent *benkyu* in the Kathmandu Valley town of Bhaktapur. In preparation for the arrival of the *aji*, Tara Shrestha, the baby's aunts had scrubbed and purified the house from top to bottom. In the kitchen, an area of the floor against one wall had been demarcated for the ritual with a purifying coat of cow dung mixed with red clay. Everyone had taken a bath in the morning. The new mother had risen at dawn, scrubbed herself from head to toe, and put on clean clothes. She sat outside on the kitchen balcony, cradling her tiny mite of a daughter in her hands. As soon as Tara arrived, she took the baby and gave her a good washing under the tap, massaged her with mustard oil, and wrapped her in a clean scrap of cotton sari.

Tara made food offerings for Chwaasa Ajima, Ganesha and other Gods which after blessing were shared with the mother and family. Cleansed and protected, the baby was formally introduced to her father. He

joined his wife and baby in the kitchen, and Tara blessed them all with red *tika* on their foreheads. But before the father could take his baby, Tara snatched her. Tara held the baby close and refused to give her up until the father had held up a large banknote in front of her. At this, the tension of the ritual dissolved and the whole family burst out laughing.

In exchange for the money, Tara placed the baby on her father's lap. "At this moment, he is saying 'I am the father of this child. This is my child,'" Tara explained to me. "He's saying it to everybody: to the Gods all around us, to the family, and to the society at large. Now this baby is a part of this father's family."

Meanwhile, Tara collected a drop of the mother's milk to add to Chwaasa Ajima's portion of food offerings. Her milk was scanty and she was worried. The baby's aunt carried Chwaasa Ajima's offerings in silence down the stairs and to the crossroads, where she left them. Everyone else in the kitchen congratulated the father, and put money on the baby's forehead to honor the *aji*. Then it was time to eat. The new mother broke her fast first, with a hot drink of *pachak* herbs to help her digestion, then a full plate of rice, ghee, molasses, meat (few Nepalese are vegetarians) and other warming foods cooked with salt.

To conclude the *benkyu* ritual, Tara prepared *gajal*, or eye-black, for the baby's eyes. While the mother and baby went out into the sun to get an oil massage, Tara smeared a large iron knife with oil, placing it on top of the lamp which, in turn, was placed on top

1. Baby Blessing

2. First Feeding

(upper left) The newborn baby is bathed as part of the *benkyu* ritual and then presented to its father; (lower left) at the ritual's conclusion, *gajal* or lamp-black is applied as a tilak and to the baby's eyes; at six months the baby is fed its first solid food in the *janko* ceremony (far right) and then taken to the local Ganesha temple for blessings (below)





of a container full of rice grain. Slowly the flame blackened the oil. With her forefinger Tara scooped up some *gajal*, outlined the baby's eyes and gave her a large black *tika*, then handed the baby back into her mother's arms. It was early afternoon by now, and everyone was calm, content and sleepy. Taking her portion of the feast and the money offered her in a plastic bag, Tara left.

A few days later, Tara called: "Do you know, the puja went perfectly. As soon as it was complete, the mother's milk came in fully and the baby grows bigger and prettier every day."

First Feeding

The *janko* samskara is a joyful event, taking place at the age of five months for girls, and seven months for boys. This is the Newar baby's first feeding of solid food—specifically, rice cooked with salt. So complete is the identification of food with cooked rice in Nepal that the same word is used for both.

The auspicious moment for the rice-feeding ceremony is selected by the family astrologer based on the baby's birth chart. For poor families, the ritual can be conducted simply, without a brahmin priest; the baby is dressed up in new clothes and silver anklets, taken to the neighborhood Ganesha temple, and fed a bit of the blessed remainders of the rice pudding, sesame *ladus*, and *goja* cones of rice dough offered to Ganesha. With the God's blessing, the baby may now eat cooked rice, and can also wear the red *tika* blessing on his or her forehead—for the first time since the *macha bu benkyu* ceremony.



JOSHIAH W. HOOPER



THOMAS KELLY

(above) Anna-Nibha von Rospatt, of Newar-German descent, is prepared for *ih*i, a ceremony in which the girl is symbolically married to a divine husband. (left) The young girls have the ceremony at odd-numbered ages—5, 7 or 9. (below) under direction of the priest, these mothers and daughters begin the *ih*i ceremony by touching the plate of puja materials. (right) With relatives gathered around, the girls sit in their father's lap for the *kanyadan* ceremony, the part of a wedding in which the father gives the bride to the groom.



ALEXANDER VON ROSPATT



For most Newars, however, the rice-feeding ceremony of a beloved baby is an all-day festivity. Early in the morning, the brahmin priest comes to establish and worship an image of Ganesha. Next to him sit the mother and her baby. The head of the family gives the baby a set of clothes and a gold cloth cap, heavy silver anklets and bracelets and gold earrings.

Next, the senior family member offers the baby a plate bearing different objects, such as a pen, a piece of brick, a lump of clay and golden ornaments. Whatever the baby grabs first represents the occupation he will choose later in life. As the family laughs and exclaims over the baby's choice, he is dressed in his fancy clothes and new ornaments. It is time to visit the neighborhood Ganesha temple. But first, the *aji* must worship Goddess Chwaasa Ajima with offerings of broken rice grains and a bit of a vest the baby has worn. This signals the Goddess and the *aji* both that their primary responsibility for the baby is over. A new phase of life begins.

It is the maternal uncle and paternal aunt who take the baby to bow to the neighborhood Ganesha. The baby gets a bit of *ladu*

prasad and returns home. The *aji* is thanked with a gift of new clothes and money.

Now the baby begins a lifetime of eating by being presented with a *thaybhu*, a ceremonial brass plate on a tripod, overflowing with cooked rice and "everything that grows from the earth." The feast represents the earth's plenty, and the wish that the child should never lack for good things to eat. After feeding the baby five little pinches of food, the mother can then eat whatever she likes from the plate. What remains will be given to the Goddess.

Next, the real fun of feeding the baby begins. It is the baby's grandfather or great-grandfather who gets the first turn, feeding a bit of rice-pudding on a golden coin or a silver spoon. The rest of the family takes turns feeding the baby, giving him presents of clothes, money, toys and jewelry, and adding to the *tika* blessing on his forehead. In the evening, the family will provide a feast to relatives, neighbors and friends that may bring several hundred people together.

Ihi: Marriage Divine

In a Kathmandu temple courtyard or square,

I was startled one day to see one hundred four- to nine-year-old girls dressed as brides. Their clothes were magnificent red brocade or gold cloth. Their hands and feet had been reddened, and they were resplendent with gold jewelry. These little girls were undergoing an initiation known as *ih*i.

Because there is no rite of passage for girls that explicitly corresponds to the *upanayana* or *bartaman* ritual for boys, Newars conduct the *ih*i ritual for pre-pubescent girls. The ceremony contains elements in common with the boys' ritual, including the taking of seven steps representing one's travel through all the worlds. But the central event of *ih*i is a symbolic wedding, in which the girl's father holds his daughter on his lap and gives her in marriage to a divine groom, represented by a bel (wood apple) fruit.

Within Hinduism, the divine groom is identified as Lord Vishnu or Suvarna Kumar, Siva's bachelor son, also known as Murugan or Karttikeya. In Buddhism, the groom is Sudhana Kumara, the ideal Buddha-like husband. Whichever the case, the ritual is not so much about a divine husband, but about a father and his daughter. Through *ih*i, a girl

3. Ihi: The Divine Wedding



THOMAS KELLY



enjoys full membership in her father's family and caste. It is only after *ihi* that a girl can marry.

"They say that the size of the bel fruit you get will be the size of your husband!" Rajani Maharjan said. "My bel was a big one, and everybody teased me that I was going to have a fat husband." A grandmother in Patan said, "I made sure to choose a nice medium bel for my daughters and granddaughters. Their husbands should be just right."

After *ihi*, girls are reminded to act more grown up. "They say that after *ihi*, we shouldn't sit on our father's lap anymore," Rajani Maharjan continued. "My mother would say, you've had your *ihi*, so you should be careful about how and what you eat."

The *ihi* ceremony takes two full days. Involving far more than the symbolic wedding, it is a celebration of the girls' gender. Led by a brahmin or a tantric Buddhist priest and performed by their parents and other relatives, the girls are worshiped as auspicious, empowered and consecrated, just as a queen or a Goddess would be. The ceremonies convey the message that the girl's person is powerful, generative and good.

Perhaps that is why more than one Nepal-based Western father has had the ritual performed for his daughters. "I felt so much pride in my daughters," one said, "and getting them all dressed up and doing the ceremony was a reflection of that." Alexander von Rospatt, a Western scholar of Buddhism who is married to a Newar woman, said "the *ihi* and other rites of passage performed earlier have grounded the girls not only in the



culture and religion of their mother, but also in her family." For *ihi*, like other Newar life-cycle rites, celebrates the development of an individual into a whole person, while at the same time weaving her into a sustaining fabric of familial and communal relationships.

Barah

When a girl begins menstruating, everything changes. She is no longer a child but a fertile woman, able to conceive and bear children. Her ability to hold and bring forth life is an auspicious thing, worthy of celebration. But menstrual blood, particularly the first time, is frightening and impure. The *barah* rite of passage reconciles this contradiction by "purifying the womb" before the first menstruation.

During *barah* a girl goes back into the earth. For twelve days, she stays in a "cave," a room in her house heavily curtained, with the windows papered over. Under no circumstances may she see the sun, or the face of any man, including her father, brothers and other relatives. For the first four days, she observes strict purifying restrictions. She may not eat salt, may not comb her hair, may not see a mirror, and must sit on straw wear-

ing just a petticoat to eat her plain meal. Her family may still do puja and attend feasts during these four days. But on the fifth day, the family enters a state of pollution similar to that caused by childbirth, while the girl in *barah* ends her austerities and begins to beautify herself. Presented with a traditional beauty scrub made of roasted grains (*kon*) and mustard oil (*chikan*), she starts to "make herself fairer." She practices putting on her mother's old saris, wears silver anklets, and plays with makeup.

The reason for a ritual and how it is experienced can differ widely. Even though some of the elder Buddhist priests I spoke with clearly held women in high esteem, they described the ritual as primarily being one to safeguard the family against the powerful effects of the first menstrual blood. But the girls I spoke with experienced their *barah* as a joyful and even thrilling time, when they experienced at a profound level the positive value of their female bodies and the changes puberty would bring. "All of our female relatives have to come to feed us while we are in the *barah*," Rajani Maharjan remembered. "They feed us special foods—roasted peas and soybeans, corn, peanuts, sugarcane, yogurt,

beaten rice—all kinds of things the earth yields to give us strength. We feel ourselves to be so special." With lots of cousins and friends in the *barah* room with them, the girls play games, dance, put makeup on each other and giggle.

In 2008, I visited Liza, the daughter of friends, while she was in her *barah* confinement. At least six other little girls, some of them cousins and some of them school-mates, kept her company during the day. The girls were giggling, singing along to the radio, putting on lavish quantities of lipstick and eye shadow, and eating lots of roasted beans, peanuts, cookies and tangerines. We adult women, relatives and friends, sat on straw mats against the wall. "This is nothing compared to my day," reminisced her grandmother. "In my day, the old ladies danced so hard that puffs of dirt flew up from the mud floor!" Later, Rajani's mother said, "These girls don't have as much imagination as we had. We used to put on long plays and dramas. Some of the girls and grandmas would dress up as men. We laughed so hard we choked."

On the twelfth day of *barah*, the young woman is ready to emerge, strengthened and

4. Barah: Girl's Coming of Age



(top left) Dipita Phaiju, 12, receives handfuls of rice, fruits and cloth from her grandmother with the blessing, "May you never lack these necessities of life." (far left) Dipita takes food from the *thaybhu*, "plate of plenty," piled with Newar delicacies. (left) close up of the *thaybhu*. (above) Dipita with father Deepak (left) and priest (center) ward off negative astrological influences. (right) Upon the completion of the twelve days of solitude, Dipita's mother Sangita leads her daughter, dressed as a bride, outside. Dipita must first see the Sun before anyone else sees her face.





purified by her time held inside the earth, to see Surya Dya, the sun. Before first light, our Liza took a complete bath, while her mother and aunt scrubbed and purified the house from top to bottom. Then it was time for beautification. Dressed like a bride in cloth of gold and red brocade, her hair twisted up in an elaborate bun, laden with gold jewelry and the golden headdress of a bride, Liza glowed in the center of the fussing, loving the attention of her female relatives.

After hours of preparation, she was finally ready. Her mother put a shawl over her head and led her upstairs to the rooftop terrace, where the family's tantric Buddhist priest was offering puja worship to the sun and planets. Slowly Liza lifted her veil. To protect her eyes, used to darkness, from the full dazzling radiance of the sun, she first gazed at its reflection in a brass vessel filled with water in which a golden ring had been placed. Then she turned and, twisting her fingers into the characteristic mudra or gesture for sun worship, held up her hands and looked through them at the sun. It was a moment charged with power. In her own body, Liza was uniting the strength of the earth with the energy of the sun.

From now on, Liza would be an auspicious woman, ready to bring wealth, grain, children and light to everyone around her. She had become the Lakshmi of her house, and as such, she held the emblems of the Goddess Lakshmi, the *jal nakhan* or sacred mirror, and the *sinhahmu* vessel for vermilion powder. Her father, followed by her uncles and the other men present, came to look at her face, and offered her money to congratulate her.

To bless and celebrate her new status, Liza

was taken by her paternal aunt and other relatives to show herself to the neighborhood Ganesha. On returning home, she sat again on the rooftop near the priest, who instructed her as she offered puja worship to the sun, the moon and all the planets, as well as to Deities. At last, Liza was offered *thaybhu*, the ceremonial feast plate heaped high with the good things the earth gives to eat, which is part of many of these ceremonies. Everyone broke their fast with the blessed food.

In the afternoon, Liza took off the heavy bridal sari made of Banaras silk and changed into a sumptuous new outfit given to her by her maternal uncle. Sitting in front of a large brass vessel, she extended her two cupped hands. Each relative or friend in turn poured three overflowing handfuls of unhusked rice grain into her hands, which she let fall into the vessel, and then presented her with a gift of new clothes and money. Soon the vessel in front of her was mounded high with grain and there was a stack of bright new clothes next to her, demonstrating the abundance that our young woman had come to represent.

In the evening, Liza sat at the entryway to welcome guests, the center of attraction at a feast for several hundred people held in her honor. All dressed up and wearing bridal gold, she received the love and good wishes of her family and community, who rejoiced in the presence of another Lakshmi in their midst.

Bartaman/Kayta Puja

Between the ages of four and thirteen, Newar boys undergo a rite of passage to become full members of their patriline and caste. Even if they are quite small at the time, they be-

come, for religious purposes, men, able to conduct and participate in sacrifices and other rituals, marry and, most importantly, to perform the death rituals for their parents.

The *bartaman* or *kayta puja* rites vary between castes, between those Newars who use a brahmin priest and those who use a Buddhist tantric priest and even between different parts of the Kathmandu Valley. But they are all based upon the brahmanical *upanayana*, or sacred thread ceremony, and they have in common "going away" from family life as the boy knew it, and "coming back" transformed. The boy renounces the life of a householder, has his head shaved and, naked, dons a loincloth. He is turning to a religious life, leaving his parents to study the *Vedas*, or going out to the forest like Rama and Lakshmana of the *Ramayana* epic, or becoming a monk, like the disciples of the Buddha. He takes seven sanctified steps, marked out with leaves and flower petals, to signify his traveling all the worlds, and "goes forth" to the neighborhood temple or monastery—making sure that everybody sees him in his new state.

It is the maternal uncle who lures the boy back to family life by offering him money. The boy then promises to stay home and at the same time fulfill the duties of a religious student. He is now permitted to take an active part in all religious ceremonies.

Newars in the Kathmandu Valley take this rite of passage very seriously. They spend months preparing all the ingredients for the intricate rituals, and they spend lavishly on a celebratory feast for hundreds of relatives and friends. The whole family on both the father's and the mother's side get involved. After all, here is their son, who will carry on



their family and caste lineage, and who will light their funeral pyres when they die.

But why would two casteless Americans, far from their relatives, want to perform the *bartaman* ritual for their sons? Photographer Thomas Kelly said, "We don't have enough rituals in our culture that help boys think deeply about what it means to be a man." Kelly and his wife, anthropologist Carroll Dunham, have lived in Kathmandu for 32 years. They said they have spent the last two years encouraging their boys to ask questions and explore the spiritual traditions around them, in a conscious process to help them come of age.

"I've taken them to the Pasupatinath temple and showed them sons cremating their parents," Kelly continued. "And I've said to them, this is what it is; this is what you will be doing for me. We shouldn't avoid thinking about it. They realize that death is a part of life." Liam Kelly, 13, said, "It was pretty embarrassing having my head shaved. But it was wonderful, too. I feel like I'm ready to take on more responsibilities now."

Wedding

To get their children married to a suitable partner is among the most sacred duties of Newar parents. Marriage turns a boy or a girl into a full human being, an adult with a future as well as a past, and a lineage of descendants as well as ancestors. Marriage also weaves two families together into a network of reciprocal obligations. From beginning to end, the rituals uniting two Newar families go on for over a year, and require large outlays of money and effort. But the central feature of a wedding is the *kanyadan*—the handing over of an auspicious woman by her



5. Kayta Puja: Boy's Coming of Age



(counter-clockwise from left) Newar priest prepares for Kayta Puja; offerings include sindoor, red cloth, beans, betel nut, puffed rice and black sesame; each boy's head is shaved. (left to right) Manish, 7, Dipesh, 7, and Manjil, 11, with their paternal aunts; blessing for the boys at the Bhadrakali Temple; ceremony concludes with lighting of a hundred thousands wicks divided into four bowls and set at each corner of the temple.





parents to a man and his family.

After marriage negotiations are complete and the actual wedding nears, the groom's mother and a few other relatives bring betel nuts to the bride. With this ritual the betrothal is fixed. The ritual used to be quite simple and required only eight betel nuts, some vermilion powder and a lump of molasses. But it now includes gifts such as a sari, makeup and lavish presents of sweets and fruits. "This is the way the neighbors find out I am going to be married," Rajani Maharjan said. "They see them bringing all those things and then they start teasing, saying, who's the lucky boy? When are you going to feed us the feast? But what the ceremony really means is that his mother is saying, 'This girl now belongs to us.'"

The day of Rajani's wedding feast, she woke early, her stomach all in a flutter. The day before, as before all life-cycle rites, her close relatives had performed *shraddha*, making purifying offerings to her father's dead ancestors. Now she took a long and thorough bath. Out her window, she could see relatives from near and far gathering to start preparing the feast. Enormous heaps of ginger and garlic, tomatoes and cauliflowers, radishes and onions, meat and spices were being chopped and cooked in pots the size of bathtubs, all accompanied by laughter and gossip.

But Rajani was fasting. As was the custom, she walked to her maternal uncle's house, where her uncle's wife congratulated her with the ritual blessing of *sagun* and then fed her beaten rice and yogurt, fruits and sweets. This was worship of a kind, in which Rajani's maternal uncle's wife was feeding her offerings that celebrated her auspiciousness as the Goddess Lakshmi. After the wedding, all of her married aunts will invite her to their homes to feed her in the same way, turn by turn.

When she returned, Rajani had no time to inspect the cooking. It was going to take her all day to get dressed in a red and gold brocade sari, cloth of gold blouse, an elaborate hair-do, make-up and all the gold jewelry that relatives from every side could put together. Lots of female friends and relatives crammed into the room to help, tweaking and pinning, curling and combing. There was laughter, but tension, too, because it was a point of honor for all of us there to make Rajani into the most beautiful bride ever—truly a Goddess in appearance. Her face, hands,

(above right) Dipesh, Manjil and Manish ring the bell at Bhadrakali Temple, their family temple, at the conclusion of their *kayta puja*; Long-time Nepal residents photographer Thomas Kelly and wife Carroll Dunham participate in the *kayta puja* for their two boys



THOMAS KELLY



LIAM GALEN



hair and clothes became a collective project.

Now that the Kathmandu Valley has been built up, there isn't as much space left for wedding feasts, so many city-dwellers hold their wedding feasts in "Party Palaces" rented for the purpose. At her Party Palace, Rajani sat in state near the entryway on a red velvet throne, dressed in all her finery. As each guest arrived, they handed the bride a gift. In return, she put a few betel nuts into their hands as a blessing. Six hundred guests filled the halls, taking turns to sit in rows to be served a feast of beaten rice and savory dishes off of disposable plates made of leaves stitched together with slivers of bamboo.

Rajani's maternal uncle had supervised most of the cooking, while other relatives and friends served the food and women of the family poured homemade liquors—rice beer and distilled rice whisky (not many teetotalers here, either)—into clay saucers. The bride and her closest friends and relatives eat last, when it is already late. Nobody from the groom's side attends. The wedding feast for Newar brides is more like a send-off, where everyone from her side comes to wish her well and give her a gift for her new home. It is all about her.

Early the next morning, Rajani began beautifying herself all over again. This was the most important day of all, the day when her groom would come to get her in a procession led by a brass band; when she would ritually choose him as her husband in the *svayamvar* ceremony and her parents would confirm her choice in the *kanyadan* ceremony, and when he would take her away with him to be formally welcomed into his home and his family.

Rajani was visibly nervous, twisting a handkerchief in her hennaed fingers. Two generations ago, Newar families of the farmer caste did not perform *swayamvar* and *kanyadan*. But now these Hindu rituals are performed at most Newar weddings, even though the *swayamvar* is rare in India itself. "I heard the band approaching, and I peeked out the window," Rajani Maharjan remembered later. "A bolt of nervousness shocked through me. All those people, his family and his friends, all dressed up, were there for me! I wasn't ready yet. My hands started trembling. But still I felt grand!"

Brides are supposed to fast before the *swayamvar* ceremony, but many of them consent to drink a little pure milk or eat a

biscuit or two. Rajani refused to eat a single bite. She wanted the power of her intention and the purity of her fasting to make her marriage rituals stronger.

"During the *swayamvar* ceremony," Rajani continued, "I put a garland on him, and he put one on me. I put a ring on his finger. I was afraid it would be too tight, but it just fit him. He put a ring on my finger. I walked around him three times, and I bowed to his feet. The whole time I was praying with all my heart, May this marriage last forever. May we help each other throughout life. May I never need to live without him in my life." Her bridegroom took a special box of red sindur powder and rubbed a large pinch of it into the parting of Rajani's hair. She would wear it for four days and keep the rest of the sindur powder carefully, for it represented the life-force of her husband, now entrusted to her protection.

At this point, the groom and those he brought with him left the room. They went downstairs to join the musicians and the rest of their people, to be fed an elaborate snack. Inside, it was time for Rajani to say goodbye. She sat cross-legged, her head bent, her face buried in a handkerchief. Close relatives ap-

6. Marriage



(above) Relatives and friends beautify bride Rajani Maharjan. (right) After circling groom Shankar Dangol three times, Rajani garlands him to demonstrate her free choice of him as her husband, in the same way Hindu princesses in the past chose their husbands.



ALL PHOTOS: THOMAS KELLY



proached to give her their wedding gift and receive betel nuts in return. Everyone began weeping, louder and louder, with Rajani weeping the most convulsively of all. I couldn't help crying myself, either.

By the time her mother and father approached her, last of all, they were crying so hard they had to be held up on either side. People murmured approvingly. It wouldn't do not to cry at your own wedding, because your tears demonstrate how much you love your parents and how painful it is to leave.

But now it was time to go. The groom's mother came in and, taking Rajani by the hand, raised her to her feet. It was time for the *kanyadan* ceremony, in which the bride and groom clasp their four hands together, with her father's hands holding them, top and bottom. Rajani's mother poured holy water through all the hands as the priest recited sacred words. At the end, the priest asked Rajani's father to place her hands into the groom's hands and told her husband, "If you kill her, you will bear the sin, and if you cherish her, you will gain the merit. From now on, her welfare is your responsibility."

The bridegroom went downstairs. Blinded by tears, Rajani was carried downstairs on her maternal uncle's back. (Luckily for everyone, Rajani was slim and her uncle strong. Those with weak or tiny uncles must be content with having him lead her by the hand.) With

Rajani sobbing on his back, her uncle circled the waiting car three times, then put her inside. She sat in the middle, with her husband on one side, and one of her own aunts to keep her company on the other. The groom's sister sat at the front.

While Rajani's family cried and looked devastated, the groom's procession began to perk up as the car slowly pulled away. The band began to play love songs and Hindi film tunes. Male relatives and friends of the groom walked ahead of the car, dancing all the way, celebrating their victory in bearing away such a beautiful bride.

By tradition, Rajani had to dry her tears when she passed her neighborhood Ganesha, where senior members of each family formally bade each other goodbye. Her own relatives and friends weren't supposed to follow her any further.

When she reached her new home, the senior women of her new family were waiting, with lamps lit, to perform *laskus*, or the ritual of welcome. Instructed by the family priest, the senior woman offered the new couple light and flowers, while the groom's mother washed Rajani's feet in red beer. Grasping one end of a large antique key that represents entry into the house at all levels, the senior woman gave Rajani the other end to hold, and led her into the house. From now on, this would be her primary residence.

Brought to the terrace, Rajani was seated facing east, her husband beside her, for the *honkegu* or "bringing together" ritual. With their heads touching, the bride and groom received showers of flower petals, rice grains, money and bits of fruit poured out from a rice measure by the senior woman. Whatever life brings them, they will receive together.

Next, the family offered the new couple a *thaybhu*, the feast plate of plenty. Eating from the same plate, the groom ate a bite of food first; then Rajani ate. She rinsed her fingers. He did not. They repeated this several times. Each time Rajani ate after her husband, she demonstrated her willingness to eat his *jutho*, or leftover food, which, for her, becomes prasad, a blessing and a public display of intimacy.

Finally, Rajani gave betel nuts to each family member in turn, receiving a gift of money from each, and then bowing to their feet. Last of all, she stood, gave betel nuts to her husband, and bowed to his feet in front of the whole extended family. Everyone cheered and laughed as the couple was congratulated with the *sagun* blessing and everyone participated by taking a red tika on the forehead.

Marriage here is not a single act, as it is for many in the West, but is cemented over a period of weeks or months, with numerous rituals. That very same evening, Rajani

was brought back to a Bhairab temple in between her new house and her old one, for the *khwa swoyu*, or "seeing her face" ritual. With the idea that her own family needed to make sure she was all right, Rajani sat flanked by unmarried sisters or cousins, while each one of her male relatives and their friends came up to her in turn, peered at her face, and presented her with gold jewelry or money. Some also took the opportunity to bless her aloud, making heartfelt wishes for her happiness and ease during her married life.

Rajani's father approached her first, and gave her two heavy gold bangles. When it was my turn, I gave Rajani a gold chain. The gifts from senior relatives and friends endowed Rajani with some money of her own, but also showed her new family that she had powerful allies. Later, the mood lifted. Everyone began laughing as Rajani's younger brother and his friends approached, teasing, and showered several hundred rupees in one-rupee coins, one at a time, into her lap and her hands.

After *khwa swoyu*, Rajani went back home to her parents' house to sleep. There were more ceremonies to complete: she still had to appear at her husband's wedding feast, go with him and his family to the temple of the Goddess Bijeshwari, where people witnessed him putting more red sindur in her hair; and, finally, her groom had to be welcomed for-



(top left) Sindoor is applied to the part in the bride's hair, a Hindu custom dating back to the Indus Valley. (far left) Groom Shankar Dangol with his sister and sister-in-law; the bride's uncle carries her around the groom's car as she weeps in sadness at leaving her family home. (above) The bride's mother and aunts gather for a group photo. (right) As the brass band plays, the groom's relatives dance in the street as they escort the bride to her new home.





mally as a son-in-law by her parents.

Only then did she go home with her husband to sleep in the marriage bed. Even then, the process of transferring a young woman to her new home is a gentle one. During the first year of marriage, a Newar woman spends as much time at her parents' house as she does with her husband. She is given time to get used to her new identity and the responsibilities she will bear in a lifetime of marriage.

Bura Janko

When a Newar individual or married couple survives to old age, they begin to transform from ordinary people into divine elders. This elevation in status is confirmed and celebrated by a series of old-age rituals called *bura janko*, which take place when a man or woman reaches the specified age, or, in the case of a married couple, when the husband reaches the specified age.

Unlike other life-cycle rites, the *bura janko* rituals are not compulsory, but they are highly prized and increase the prestige of the family that performs them. A *bura janko* is in many ways as elaborate and public an event as a wedding, requiring lavish outlays, the cooperation of a whole network of relatives and friends, and months of preparation.

At the same time, it is powerfully auspicious, bringing all the Gods and cosmic forces in alignment, so much so that, for women, the inauspiciousness of widowhood is removed by the *bura janko* ceremony, allowing an elderly lady to resume wearing gold ornaments, red clothing and red *tikas* on her forehead for the first time since the death of her husband. New sacred images are of-

ten consecrated at a *bura janko*, and families make sure to perform other rites of passage, such as *ihī*, at the same time in order to benefit from the outflow of blessings.

Newar *shastras* detail four or even five *bura janko* ceremonies. The first of these takes place when a man or a woman reaches the age of 77 years, 7 months, 7 days, 7 *gathis* (24 minutes each), and seven *palas* (24 seconds each). The second takes place when the elder "sees the thousandth full moon," or at the age of 1,000 months, roughly between 81 and 84 years old, depending on how intercalary months are counted. A third ritual is celebrated at 88 years, 8 months, 8 days, and so on, and a fourth at 99 years, 9 months, 9 days and so on. A few handbooks even specify a ritual for the age of 110 years, 10 months and 10 days.

Similar rituals are still practiced in some parts of India; for example, some Tamil Brahmins perform the first ritual but at the age of 70 rather than at the age of 77. Elsewhere in India, an old-age rite is celebrated at the age of 60. Depending on who is doing the calculating, each of these ages can be seen as a full lifespan, with the rite of passage helping the elder move through the danger zone into a new, reinvigorated phase of life.

All of the *bura janko* ceremonies are similar to Hindu birthday rituals in India, in that they propitiate planetary Deities and the eight Deities of longevity and remove negative influences from a person's lifespan. But they go far beyond removing the negative. Joyfully, with pomp and fanfare, they introduce the elder to the company of the Gods.

The rituals are called *ratarohana*, which

means "mounting the chariot." At each, the chariot to be mounted is identified with a specific Deity. The elders enact their identification with that Deity by mounting the chariot and taking the divine seat or asana upon it. This forms the most public part of most *bura jankos*, when the elder is carried or pulled in a chariot around town, in a procession nearly identical to a Deity's festival. Word spreads and the elder's fame grows.

Successive *bura jankos* vary with each level the elder has attained. For example, at the ceremony marking 88 years, the elder reenters the house via a ramp built up to an upper-storey window, bypassing the impure ground floor that would do injustice to his or her divine status. At the ceremony marking 99 years, the elder is placed in a huge clay pot made for the occasion, which functions as the womb. After rituals that enact conception and embryonic development, a hole is broken in the pot and the elder is "reborn" through the hole. These rites are, like centarians, rare indeed, and Newars believe that they rejuvenate the elder, causing him or her to grow a new set of teeth and black hair all over again.

Conclusion

The "ten karma" or life-cycle rituals described above aren't set in stone. They evolve as people adapt them to their circumstances and vary according to the caste, locality and religion of the Newars performing them. Some changes reflect the fact that they have less free time but more disposable income than before, because instead of working at their hereditary occupations and making



their own schedules, they are taking salaried jobs.

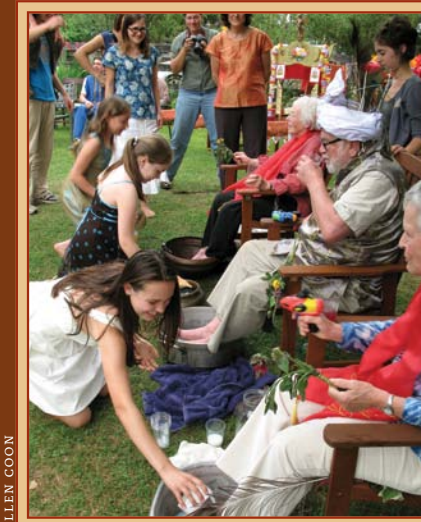
For example, many fewer families than before are confining their daughters for the full twelve days of the *barah* ceremony, with its demands on the whole network of married female relatives to come and feed the girl. Instead, the girl is sent to a Theravada Buddhist vihar, to spend a few days with the nuns there, learning to read and recite simple Buddhist texts.

Other families avoid the expense and work that a full *barah* entails by sending their daughters to join another girl for the last one or two nights of her *barah*, emerging when she does to see the sun, but skipping most of the ceremony and the feast. With the *benkyu* birth ritual, many families make things simpler by having the mother-in-law or other senior woman of the house perform a quick ceremony, rather than calling in their traditional *aji*. Weddings, on the other hand, are growing more lavish, a chance to show off with extravagant expenditures on food and goods.

No matter how they vary and evolve, though, these life-cycle rites point to an understanding that life is not experienced seamlessly, and that individuals take on different identities at different ages and stages of life. Newars make these individual transitions public and visible through ritual, each person made stronger by the presence and support of others.

Ellen Coon offers special thanks to Dr. Alexander von Rospatt for his assistance with this article. Ellen may be contacted at ellenjcoon@gmail.com

An American Adaptation



ELLEN COON



ELLEN COON

By ELLEN COON

When my father turned 80, I did not want to give him an ordinary birthday party. I wanted a ritual that would allow his relatives and friends to celebrate him and my mother as elders in their community. The *bura janko* ceremony provided us with a beautiful model of such a ritual, though I knew that we would not, in the United States, be able to reproduce all of its details, especially without a Newar priest. Instead, we tried to convey the essence of the ritual and to follow the sequence of its most important elements. What followed did, like the original *bura janko*, reinforce and demonstrate family solidarity, while letting our elders, as well as the community at large, know how much we love and value them.

We began by welcoming my father, mother and aunt and escorting them to special seats under a tree. Next, as at a Newar ritual, we worshiped the *sukunda* lamp, which represents Ganesha. At *bura janko* rituals in the Kathmandu Valley, the Gods are invited and assembled by ritual means to shower the participants with blessings. At our *bura janko*, we held a "Convocation of the Gods" in which members of a local dance troupe, wearing sacred masks, came out one by one to greet the elders and to be offered light, flowers and incense. We presented our elders with coral and pearls, new clothes and, for my father, a turban.

The next part of the ritual, I thought, might be a bit tricky to convey to Westerners. In the Kathmandu Valley, the elder puts his feet into a large vessel, and family members line up one by one to pour water from a conch shell over the elder's feet, and bow down to him or her with their foreheads. In return, the elder blesses the younger person by dipping a bundle of herbs and flowers into the foot-water and sprinkling it over the descendant's head and into his or her mouth. To my surprise, all of the guests understood that washing and bowing to our elders' feet was an opportunity to express respect and receive a blessing in return. This part of the ceremony took longer than expected, as many people lingered, on their knees, to tell the elders how much they cared for them. Western life does not afford this opportunity often.

Our elders were amazed when we seated them in palanquins, decorated with winged horses, and carried them around the garden. Among Newars, elders can ride in either a palanquin that is carried, or in a wooden cart with wheels that is pulled, by descendants and friends. The procession can take one or two hours, as the divine elder sees and is seen by the Deities in most of the major temples and shrines in his locality. When the elder returns home, he or she is no longer the same person, and so must be formally welcomed into the house with the *laskus* ceremony. We welcomed our elders through a beribboned archway in the garden, and then led them to their seats of honor at the table. Like Newars, we concluded our *bura janko* with a feast, with the Western additions of speeches, songs and musical revelry. At the end of the day, guests and relatives struggled to put into words how much more this ritual had meant to them than an ordinary party. Perhaps most telling of all, my father has asked me when we will perform his second *bura janko*.

7. Honoring Our Elders

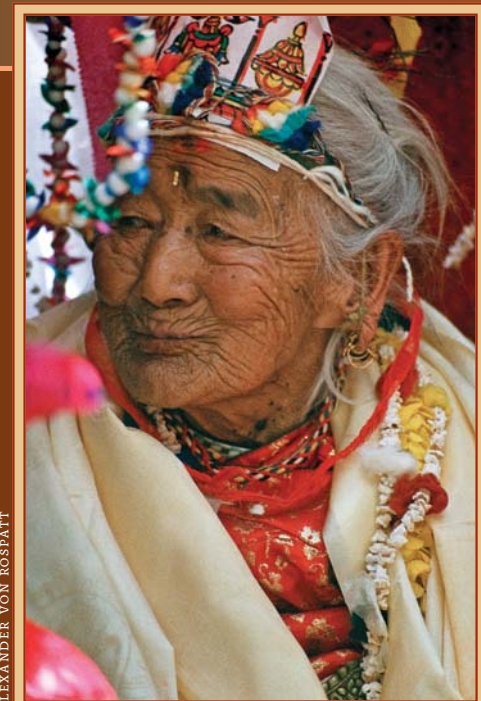


THOMAS KELLY

(left) Children honor their elder in the *bura janko* ritual by pulling her in a decorated cart as might be used for a Deity; this 99-year-old woman receives her third set of earrings, having gotten the first at 77 and the second at 83; elder in her seat of honor. (top left) Author Ellen Coon's father, mother and aunt are honored by foot washing in an adapted Newar ceremony in the US; (top right) parading her elders.



THOMAS KELLY



ALEXANDER VON ROSPATT

Sri P. Parameswaran

HINDU OF THE YEAR 2010

How a love of India and Hindu dharma drive this octogenarian's untiring campaign of social reform, writing, spiritual activism and global outreach

By G.K. NAIR, KERALA
WITH RAJIV MALIK, DELHI

TO ANSWER THE CALL OF GREAT MEN IS to risk being touched by greatness yourself. When the call is as bold and compelling as that of Swami Vivekananda, courage and persistence become requisites. To raise India to the heights Vivekananda spoke of is no easy task, but that is the defining thread of P. Parameswaran's life. As a thinker, a philosopher, a reformer and current president of Vivekananda Kendra, P. Parameswaran—the recipient of HINDUISM TODAY's 2010 Hindu Renaissance Award—strives to defend both India and Hinduism,

which to him are inseparably linked.

Parameswarji, as he is affectionately called, was born to a devout Hindu family in a small Kerala hamlet in 1927. Religion came naturally to him from childhood, when he would join his father, a priest in a local temple, in reciting mantras and hymns.

A brilliant student all through school, he received a B.A. in history. During those student years, he met two charismatic leaders who greatly influenced him. One was the president of the Ramakrishana Mission, Swami Virajananda, whose spiritual presence Parameswarji recalls with awe. "His charming personality with brilliant pierc-

ing eyes, the graceful and affectionate smile as I prostrated before him and received his blessings, it all still remains fresh in my memory. The impact was much more than his physical presence."

The other leader who made a strong impression was M. S. Golwalkar, head of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Parameswarji remembers, "As we all sat in well-ordered lines facing the platform in front, Sri Guruji, as he was called, stepped into the hall,

.....
A vision manifested: (below) The Vivekananda Memorial at Kanyakumari



ADAM JONES/WIKIMEDIA

Parameswarji: (right) At age 83, our Hindu of the Year continues unabated in his service to Hinduism and India

.....
accompanied by two or three national-level office bearers. All of us stood up, thrilled by the magnetic personality of this charismatic leader. Instantly we felt that we were in the presence of a powerful personality who held the destiny of the country in his hand. It was a mixture of spiritual and royal power, from one who knew no fear, was full of compassion and absolutely confident of his mission in life. Though that was the first camp I ever attended, it was a defining moment. We listened to him in rapt attention, answered his questions and came back beaming with a vision of the future Hindu society. The path ahead for me was clear and I never looked back. I became a *pracharak* of the RSS on completion of my study."

Idealistic, articulate and intelligent, Parameswaran rose quickly in the RSS ranks. Guruji Golwalkar asked him to be the organizing secretary of the Jan Sangh, India's nationalist political party. But that was not to last.

A Change in Direction

In 1977, India was entering a controversial time of its history, the State of Emergency. Elections were suspended, along with many rights, including freedom of speech. Parameswarji was persecuted and arrested. "Locked in jail with many politicians," he recalls, "I got to know them well—and I was disappointed. The state of emergency was soon lifted and power was in sight. But idealism was compromised. Power corrupts, and I found that my place would be better outside politics than within those circles."

Parameswarji decided to find new and better ways to serve India and its people. At first he worked at the Deendayal Research Institute, a grass-roots social institution founded by his friend Nanaji Deshmukh, who was himself abandoning politics. "My assignment at the Deendayal Institute came as a godsend. I welcomed the offer gladly and wholeheartedly," he shares. Parameswarji dedicated his time to improving the lives of simple people, managing projects that spurred irrigation efforts, created schools and taught best practices for hygiene and health.

But, as a man of ideas, he felt the need for an institution that fostered intellectual dialogue. In 1982, he went back to his home state, Kerala, and founded the Bharatheeya Vichara Kendram, aimed at national reconstruction through study and research.

Bharatheeya Vichara Kendram, a charitable society, is headquartered in Thiruvananthapuram. It is a haven for thinkers and researchers who believe India's future is



RAJIV MALIK

The Hindu Renaissance Award

The Hindu Renaissance Award was created in 1991 by the founder of HINDUISM TODAY to recognize and strengthen Hindu leaders worldwide. Previous awardees were Swami Paramananda Bharati ('90), Swami Chidananda Saraswati ('91), Swami Chinmayananda ('92), Mata Amritanandamayi Ma ('93), Swami Satchidananda ('94), Pramukhswami Maharaj ('95), Satya Sai Baba ('96),

Sri Chinmoy ('97), Swami Bua ('98), Swami Chidananda Saraswati of Divine Life Society ('99), Ma Yoga Shakti ('00), T. S. Sambamurthy Sivachariar ('01), Dada J.P. Vaswani ('02), Sri Tiruchi Mahaswamigal ('03), Dr. K. Pichai Sivacharya ('04), Swami Tejomayananda ('05), Ramesh Bhai Oza ('06), Sri Balagangadharanathaswami ('07), Swami Avdheshananda (2008) and Swami Gopal Sharan (2009).

inextricably dependent on its cultural and spiritual roots. By fostering publications and organizing camps, debates, symposia and classes over the years, the Kendram has become a place where like-minded intellectuals could gather and nurture ideas. Kerala itself has long been a state where debate is extraordinarily fierce, an epicenter of the intellectual arena where nationalists and communists strongly oppose each other, making the organization all the more relevant.

Today the organization has 30 active units in the state. It is widely influential among academics and has a strong constituent of young people, who attend seminars on history, philosophy, economics, politics, education, environment, development, social life and management.

A Man of Many Achievements

While continuing to direct and expand the Kendram, Parameswarji devoted time and energy to a wide number of other projects. He wrote several books reflecting on Indian philosophy, religion and society, including the acclaimed *Marx and Vivekananda*, *Bhagavad-Gita Vision of a New World Order*, and *Beyond All Isms to Humanism*. He also served as editor of the journals *Kesari* and *Manthan*. Currently he is editor of the monthly *Yuva Bharathi*, the *Pragati Quarterly Research Journal* and the quarterly *Vivekananda Kendra Patrilka*.

Parameswaran also founded the International Forum for Indian Heritage, a think tank to defend the subcontinent's rich cultural roots. The IFIH's website proclaims its

raison d'être: "While genuine secularism in no way rejects culture, in India our brand of secularism imposes cultural nihilism."

In 1997, in recognition of his effort in teaching the principles of Hinduism, Parameswaran was awarded the Bhaiji Hanuman Prasad Poddar Award instituted by Bada Bazaar Library of Calcutta. In 2000, he was made a member of the Court of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. In 2002, he was awarded the Amritha Keerthi Puraskar cultural award by Sri Matha Amrithananda Mayi Mutt for outstanding service to society. In 2004, the President of India awarded him the prestigious Padma Shri—India's greatest honor for civilians.

Celebrating Vivekananda's Vision

Still, Parameswarji's most important work might be his service as the president of the Vivekananda Kendra for the last 15 years. No one can be certain to what extent the Kendra's achievements have been due to his leadership, but it is certain that he has been an able successor to the tireless Eknath Ranade, the founder. His nurturance can be seen in the Kendra's dynamic growth and its ability to translate the vision of Swami Vivekananda into reality.

"There were three steps in the growth and development of the Vivekananda Kendra movement," explains Parameswarji. "The first step was to establish a monument in the memory of Swami Vivekananda at the rock memorial site, Kanyakumari."

History tell us that on a mid-sea rock, Vivekananda meditated on Mother India. He meditated on her past, present and future, the cause of her downfall and the means of her resurrection. This was not the Vivekananda of our memory, the monk who inspired awe in ignorant Westerners and reminded Indians of their greatness; no, not yet. This Vivekananda was a young renunciate living on alms, just one wandering sadhu among India's multitude of saints.

Finally, sitting at the last bit of rock in the Indian ocean, Swami Vivekananda made the momentous decision to go to the West to spread India's religion and culture throughout the whole world. In order to help his beloved India, he had to leave it. It was a difficult decision to make, for he knew he would be deemed impure if he crossed the sea.

Spreading Vivekananda's message:

A youth camp held in remote Arunachal Pradesh



Teaching, teaching, teaching: (above) one of the Kendra's many schools; (right, opposite page) by providing subsidies for the books and magazines it publishes and sells, the Vivekananda Kendra serves as an important conduit bringing nationalist ideas to the public

Eknath Ranade's vision of a monument honoring that crucial moment energized Hindus who took the teachings of Swami Vivekananda to heart. Thus began the movement that would become the Vivekananda Kendra. With small donations and dedicated volunteers, a shrine was built and inaugurated in September, 1970. "Once that memorial was erected, the idea came that a mere memorial will not do," recalls

Parameswarji. "The message of Swami Vivekananda should spread—and not just that, it should be put into action as well. So an all-India movement with a hard core of devoted life workers was visualized." In 1972, the Vivekananda Kendra was officially founded.

Activities of the Kendra

The Kendra has become a nationwide organization, but it is particularly strong in the



Northeast, where activities were initially focused. "Those areas were especially vulnerable to Christian missionary activities. There was even thought of secession, and little Indian identity. It was to prevent this that we established schools where children learn about our country's culture and unity."

Today, over 21,000 students attend the Kendra's 51 schools in Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland, Andaman Islands, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka. The organization also has preschools all over the country and vo-

cational centers which teach simple crafts.

Besides education, the Vivekananda Kendra is active in improving rural and tribal people's lives. Water management, farming techniques, natural medicine with indigenous herbs and eco-friendly technologies are explained to locals and put into practice. A taskforce researches and improves the building materials used by local villages, teaching an environmentally sound way to build durable homes. Also, by setting aside a handful of rice every day, sympathizers

of the Kendra donate enough rice to feed 12,000 poor rural children.

The Kendra's medical initiatives are impressive. Health-care camps offer eye care and dental assistance. Fourteen rural medical centers with social workers serve nearly 250 villages and 50,000 people a year. A new facility, the Vivekananda Kendra Medical Research Foundation—the Kendra's first hospital—has 40 beds and helps the people of 13 surrounding

Vivekananda's Clarion Call

The message that captivated Parameswarji is summarized by Swami Sunirmalananda of the Ramakrishna Order, India

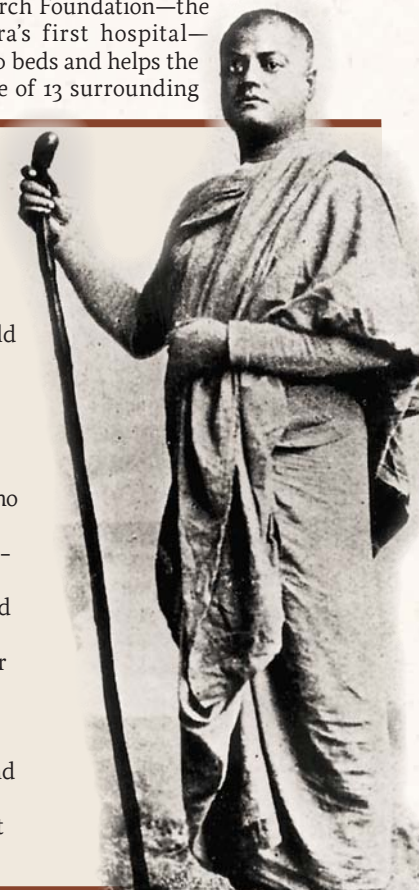
SWAMI VIVEKANANDA WAS A RARE LEADER OF pre-independence days with a positive view of India. While India struggled under the yoke of slavery, he alone said that India has a bright future. When no one hoped that India would ever be rich and great again, he alone said India would once more sit on the throne.

Swami Vivekananda struggled in cold and hunger, poverty and misery so that India could stand on her own feet again, the masses be awakened, and the glorious message of his country reach the whole world. Not one to solve national problems through superficial means, Swamiji spoke for a "root-and-branch" reform, as he called it. We are seeing this glorious change today.

But India's rise, as envisioned by him, did not come from the brutality of arms or the induce-

ment of wealth. In Vivekananda's words, "This is the great ideal before us, and every one must be ready for it—the conquest of the whole world by India—nothing less than that, and we must all get ready for it, strain every nerve for it. Let foreigners come and flood the land with their armies, never mind. Up, India, and conquer the world with your spirituality!"

His most important teaching, which is an echo of the Vedanta, is that "Each soul is potentially divine." Alas, we Indians, massacred under centuries of alien rule, had forgotten that we had innate potential. Swami Vivekananda reminded us of the truth, daring us to "Stand up, be bold, be strong. Know that you are the creator of your own destiny. All the strength and succor you want is within yourself. Therefore make your own future." Vivekananda's love and reverence for India was boundless. "I loved my motherland dearly before I went to America and England," he said. "After my return, every particle of dust of this land seems sacred to me."





villages. The Kendra also provides relief work after natural catastrophes, and it has a program to support the elderly with a monthly amount given in cash to each one. The number of lives the organization has touched is incalculable.

The movement's most important mission is to teach, defend and spread Hindu culture. "The goal," Parameswaran explains, "is to take the message of Sanatana Dharma as interpreted by Swami Vivekananda to every home, every hamlet, every school, utilizing temples and service activities as the media." The Kendra publishes books and magazines—in English, Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Assamese and Gujarati—in service of that goal.

Personality development camps, cultural events, seminars and lectures expose the young to Hindu heritage. People of all ages gather to watch culturally relevant movies. Events teach how to perform simple pujas and nurture among women the basic skills for a better family and village life. Strengthened by the certainty that theirs is a venerable culture, children find a sense of belonging and adults find pride in keeping it alive.

Research plays an important part in the campaign. Traditional customs and rituals are being documented. Another project involves an investigation of the historical continuity of Hinduism between North and South India.

The Kendra has over 200 full-time dedicated workers, helped by thousands more who donate part of their time. Many join the Kendra after retirement. Parameswarji notes,



Honoring tradition: (above) Anna Puja, when the Goddess is worshiped as a heap of rice, collected in small amounts from many households and later donated to those in need; (opposite page) invoking blessings at the Vivekananda International Foundation, New Delhi

"The Vivekananda Kendra was started with life workers, young and old, educated people with understanding who could devote their lives for a cause."

Financing has not been a problem. The institution has a program for patrons, people who identify with the cause and pledge a certain sum for a year—or for life. Additional donations come from the hundreds

of thousands who visit the Vivekananda Rock Memorial every year. "So far, we have not had any of our projects suffer from lack of funds," Parameswaran says, "We believe that every good cause will be supported by society. Swami Vivekananda taught us, 'Money and everything I want must come, because they are my slaves and I am not their slave.'"

A Thoughtful Leader Speaks Out

Why India Is a Hindu Nation

Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and even Gandhiji have said that the culture of this country is Hindu. But because of its all-inclusive nature others also could find refuge here. The Parsis (Zoroastrians), for example, flourished here. They are a very small group, less than five hundred thousands in number. But they became rich industrialists and scientists. They did not face any persecution here, never. Also, this is the only country where Jews were not tormented. But these religions did not work to make India a Judaic or Parsi nation. They did not want to convert Hindus and destroy the all-inclusive Hindu culture like some Abrahamic religions seem to be intent on doing.

The Caste System

Caste in itself is a natural phenomenon all over the world. In some form or another such groupings are found everywhere. It strengthens and supports individuals and families by providing security and



sense of belonging. In India originally it was the "Varna System." Its inalienable togetherness was a great protective mechanism for preventing religious conversion into foreign religions. One of the reasons



Plans for the Future

At age 83, Parameswaran has no plans to slow down. He is currently focusing on what he calls the third stage of the Vivekananda Kendra, developing an international presence. He explains, "What we propose is that the Vivekananda Kendra International should be a stage for dialogue between various cultures, religions and civilizations all over the world. People speak of clash of civilizations, but the Hindu concept is that there should be harmony—this is what Swami Vivekananda preached at the Chicago Parliament of Reli-

gions. There must be mutual understanding and acceptance. Yes, people differ, and that is all right, but we must try to understand each other's point of view, and that is what the Vivekananda Kendra International will help make happen. Because it is Hinduism alone that can promote harmony of religions, with its timeless tolerance and broad views, we must lead the way."

HINDUISM TODAY inquired about the keys to this respected elder's energy and accomplishments. Parameswarji begins by explaining his routine of waking up at 4:30am daily

to perform his japa, followed by exercise and pranayama. He consciously strives to live a healthy lifestyle, with plenty of intellectual engagement to keep the mind sharp. But he quickly concludes, "What keeps me going is not the observance of these routines, but the consciousness of a great goal to achieve in life and, most important of all, the Divine Grace, all pervading and ever protective."

VIVEKANANDA KENDRA WWW.VKENDRA.ORG
INSTITUTE FOR INDIAN HERITAGE WWW.IFIH.ORG
B. VICHARA KENDRAM WWW.VICHARAKENDRAM.ORG

why India remained a Hindu majority country in spite of hundreds of years of foreign invasion and domination is this binding caste affinity. But later on the utility of caste got diluted with the introduction of modern education and mobility of occupation. Caste became a mere meaningless label, which has no useful function today.

Marx and India

I don't think true Marxism exists in India anywhere. It is only for political gain that they use the name of Marx. The communism which he envisaged was not what is today defended by India's communists. It is only a façade.

Marriage and Divorce

Marriages should serve the interest of children, family and society. It is a lifelong relationship considered sacred as per the Hindu Dharma. The couple must understand that "happiness is not the product of wealth" as stated in the *Kathopanishad*. Western influence, globalization, changes in lifestyle, consumerism, the nuclear family system, egoism and economic independence all contribute to an arrogant and intransigent character in both spouses. This selfish focus on the individual makes them inflexible and eventually leads to separation and divorce.

Conversion

Swami Vivekananda said, "If a Hindu is converted, not only we are losing a Hindu but one more antagonist is created." Swami Lakshmananda (who was killed in 2008) was well known for his love for Hinduism and opposition to conversion of the poor tribals. He was working to take those converts back, and this was being opposed by evangelicals. If people want to convert others, let them convert literates persuaded by something spiritually superior to Hinduism. But converting illiterate, ignorant and innocent people using devious means is not acceptable. Conversion *per se* is a violence against an individual's freedom and the community to which he belongs.

Advice for Youth

Every young Indian should study Swami Vivekananda. Swami's mission was both national and international. A lover of mankind, he strove to promote peace and human brotherhood based on the Oneness of all. A mystic of the highest order, Vivekananda had a direct and intuitive experience of Reality. It was from that unfailing source of wisdom that he derived his ideas, often presenting them with soul-stirring poetic eloquence.

Healing, Sacred Vows and Trance Possession

Vital Facets of the
Hindu Devotee's
Relationship with
the Deities

Excerpted from Stephen
P. Huyler's Classic Work:
*Meeting God, Elements
of Hindu Devotion*



The Healing of Aditi

The news alarmed Kamala. Her little granddaughter was so young, so beautiful. She had known from the moment she was born that she would be the pride of the family, that she would succeed in life. And now they had just been told that there was nothing to be done. Little Aditi, only fourteen months old, was dying of this new strain of cholera, and the doctors were at their wits' end. The family had rushed the delirious, feverish baby to the hospital four days before in a high fever; yet despite all the care of the medical team, the strong medicines, the intravenous and oxygen, her condition had grown steadily worse.

Kamala prayed with all her concentration focused on Siva, saying his name again and again, chanting the mantra she had been given when she had come of age, asking the God for His help in this dire emergency. And then, suddenly, she knew what to do. She pushed through all the other family members: her son Pradeep, his wife Geeta, her two older sons and their wives. She went directly to the bedside, pulled out the needles and tubes from Aditi's tiny arm, took the oxygen mask from her face and cradled her in her arms. Geeta cried out in protest, reaching for her daughter as, behind her, the nurse stormed in to stop this action; but Kamala did not relinquish the girl. She firmly told her plan to everyone there. She was taking Aditi to be healed by the Goddess. Parvati would save their child. They were going to the temple at Ochira.

Everyone hurried out of the hospital and down the street towards the bus station. The next bus to Ochira was not for five hours, and they did not have enough money for a taxi. One of the girl's uncles talked a motor rickshaw into taking Kamala, Pradeep, Geeta, the baby and himself. The others would come later by bus. By pooling all their resources, they would just have enough to pay. Even by this transportation it would take almost two hours to reach the temple. They crammed themselves into the little vehicle and took off. Together they sang the praises of the Goddess, over and over calling out her name. Little Aditi stayed on Kamala's lap the whole time, her mother constantly applying fresh cloths soaked in cool water to her feverish skin. The highway was crowded and the driver had to swerve often onto the dirt siding to avoid a collision with a bus or truck. But finally they pulled up to the temple at Ochira and dismounted from the rickshaw.

Ochira is unique among all Hindu temples. Even though it has been famous throughout the area for centuries for the innumerable miracles that have taken place there, the temple itself is open air. It has the



The Power of Faith

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIASWAMI

Faith, *astikya*, is the fourth niyama [spiritual observance]. Faith is a substance, a collection of molecules, mind molecules, emotion molecules—and some are even physical—collected together, charged with the energies of the Divine and the anxieties of the undivine, made into an astral form of shape, color and sound. Being a creation built up over time, faith can just as readily be destroyed, as the following phrases indicate: crisis of faith, loss of faith, dark night of the soul, and just plain confused disappointment leading to depression. Because of faith, groups of people are drawn together, cling together, remain together, intermarry and give birth, raising their children together in the substance of faith

that their collective group is subconsciously committed to uphold. Anyone can strengthen another's faith, through encouragement, personal example, good natured humoring, praise, flattery, adulation, or take it away by the opposite methods. Many people with more faith than intellect are pawns in the hands of those who hold great faith, or of those who have little faith, or of those who have no faith at all. Therefore, we can see that a clear intellectual understanding of the philosophy is the bedrock to sustaining faith. Faith is on many levels and of many facets. We have faith in a person, a family, a system of government, science, astronomy, astrology. Faith in philosophy, religion, is the most tenuous and delicate kind and, we must say, the most

rewarding of all faiths, because once it is sustained in unbroken continuity, the pure soul of the individual begins to shine forth.

Faith has eyes. It has three eyes. The seer who is looking at the world from the perspective of monistic Saiva Siddhanta and sees clearly the final conclusions for all mankind has faith in his perception, because what he sees and has seen becomes stronger in his mind as the years go by. We have the faith of those who have two eyes upraised. They look at the seer as Dakshinamurti, God Himself, and gain strength from His every word. There is also the faith of those who have two eyes lowered. They are reading the scriptures, the teachings of all the seers, and building the aura of faith within their inner psyche. Then there are those who have faith with their eyes closed, blind faith. They know not, read not and are not thinking, but are entranced by the spiritual leader in whom they have faith as a personality. They are nodding their head up and down on his every word and when questioned are not able to adequately explain even one or two of his profound thoughts.

And then we have the others, who make up much of the world pop-

Ochira, Alappuzha District, Kerala: *A baby girl, delirious with the critical fever of cholera, is placed by her grandmother in front of the image of Paratai. Within seconds her fever has abated and she is entirely healed of the disease.*

.....

ulation today. They are also with eyes closed, but with heads down, shaking left and right, left and right. They see mostly the darker side of life. They are those who have no faith at all or suffer a semi-permanent loss of faith, who are disappointed in people, governments, systems, philosophies, religions. Their leaders they condemn. This is a sorry lot. Their home is the halls of depression, discouragement and confusion. Their upliftment is jealousy and anger.

Faith extends to another level, too, of pleasure for the sake of pleasure. Here we have the jet-set, the hedonists, the sensualists, the pornographers and their customers. All these groups have developed their own individual mindset and mix and interrelate among themselves, as the astral molecules of this amorphous substance of thought,

towering gateway common in this South Indian state of Kerala, and its grounds include a marriage hall and an assembly hall. The large field that constitutes the center of the complex contains two sacred trees and a sacred grove. Local legend states that the trees represent the Absolute Divine, Parabrahman: God without form, unmanifested in any image. It is a place like Lourdes in France, to which the faithful come to be healed.

Kamala knows right where she is going: directly to the back of the first tree. A three-foot-high cement platform surrounds and contains a peepul and a kadamba tree entwined with long gnarly roots at their base. Small open shrines on both sides are facilitated by non-brahmana priests, who conduct special pujas in the morning and evening and remain throughout the day to receive offerings, give prashad, and advise devotees in the appropriate procedures for approaching Parabrahman. Even though Ochira is maintained as a temple to the unformed Absolute, a wooden image of the Goddess Parvati stands at the rear shrine, installed by a grateful past recipient of healing. Devotees claim that many miracles have occurred here with the aid of the Goddess. It is this image that Kamala saw in her prayers in the hospital. It is here that she has brought her granddaughter to be healed.

First, at the priest's instruction, she pours fresh vermilion and sandalwood powder over the image, placing coins at Parvati's feet. Then she lowers Aditi to the sand beneath the tree. The baby is still delirious, faintly moaning as she feverishly thrashes her head back and forth. Kamala opens her heart and her mind to the Goddess, loudly calling out Her name and vowing to undergo arduous annual fasting and penance if the child is cured. Other women, strangers who

have been touched by these desperate prayers, crowd around Geeta to ululate in high-pitched rolling cries intended to keep away death. Pradeep and his brother prostrate themselves on the ground, their hands stretched out toward Parvati. The priest chants with his eyes closed. For several minutes all attention is vibrantly focused on the Goddess, all beseeching Her intervention, all requesting Her aid.

And then Aditi stops twisting her little body and lies still, her breathing regular and her eyes clear. Kamala feels her forehead, loudly proclaims that the fever is gone, and then collapses to the ground, rolling back and forth and chanting: "Amma, Amma, Amma, Amma" ("Mother, Mother, Mother, Mother!"). She is overcome with gratitude to the Goddess. Geeta and Pradeep rush forward and scoop up the little girl in their arms, tears streaming down their cheeks as they realize that she looks changed, tired and pale but no longer ill. They cry out vows to Parvati to honor Her for the rest of their lives.

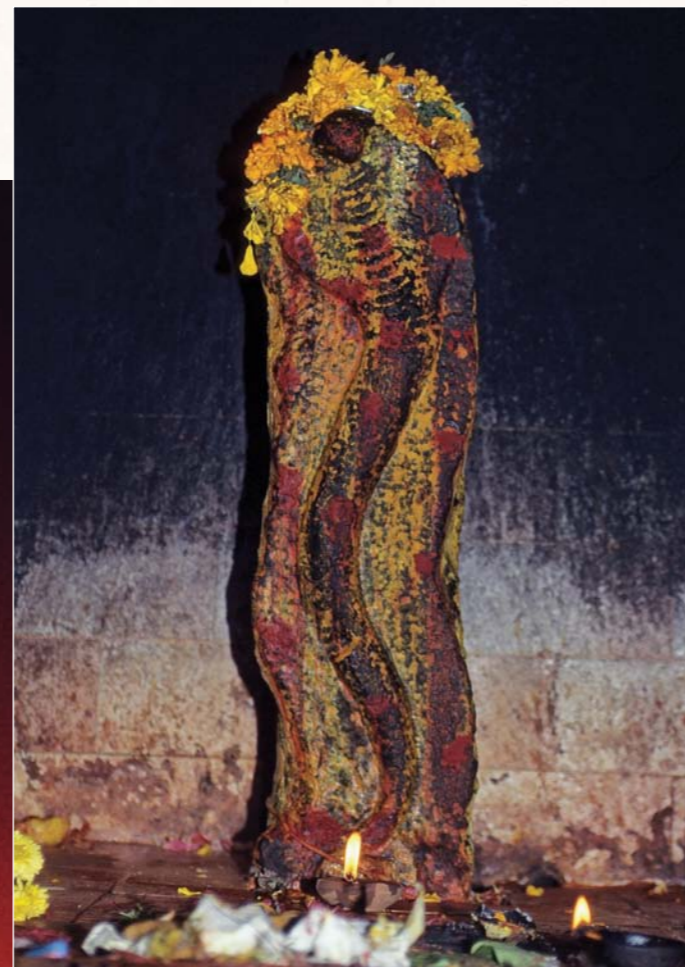
When the family has recovered, they all sit alongside the tree, each alternately picking up the small girl to stroke and kiss her. They wait for the evening puja to join the hundreds of other devotees in prayers to Parabrahman and the extraordinary sacred power manifest in this place. When the rest of their relatives arrive by bus late that night, they all share in adulation for the miracle that has taken place.

emotion and belief that we call faith creates their attitudes toward the world, other people and their possessions.

The Hindu, therefore, is admonished by the *sapta rishis* themselves to believe firmly in God, Gods, guru and the path to enlightenment, lest he stray from the path of dharma—for faith is a powerful force. It can be given; it can be taken away. It is a national force, a community force, a group force, a family force. And it is more than that, as far as the Sanatana Dharma is concerned, which can be translated as the "eternal faith," the most strengthening and illuminating of all, for it gives courage to all to apply the twenty *yamas* and *niyamas* [restraints and observances], which represent the final conclusions of the deepest deliverers of eternal wisdom who ever resided on this planet.

Some people have faith only when things are going right and lose faith when things go wrong. These are the ones who are looking up at their leaders, whom they really do not know, who are looking up at the scriptures, which they really do not understand. Because their eyes are closed, they are seeking to be sustained and constantly uplifted by others. "Do my *sadhana* for me" is their plea. And when some inconsistency arises or some expectation, unbeknownst to their leader and maybe never even recorded in the scriptures, does not manifest, a crisis of faith occurs. Then, more than often, they are off to another leader, another philosophy, to inevitably repeat the same experience. Devotees of this kind, who are called "groupies" in rock and roll, go from group to group, teacher to teacher, philosophy to philosophy. Fortunately for them, the rent is not expensive, the bhajanas are long and the food is good. The only embarrassing situation, which has to be manipulated, is the tactic of leaving one group without totally closing the door, and manipulatively opening the door of another group.

When that uplifted face with eyes closed has the spiritual experience of the eyes opening, the third eye flashing, he or she would have then found at last his or her *sampradaya*, traditional lineage of verbal teaching, and now be on the unshakable path. The molecules of faith have been converted and secured. They shall never turn back, because they have seen through the third eye the beginning and ending of the



path, the traditional lineage ordained to carry them forth generation after generation. These souls become the articulate ones, masters of the philosophy. Their faith is so strong, they can share their molecules with others and mold others' faith molecules into traditional standards of the whys and wherefores that we all need on this planet, of how we should believe and think, where we go when we die, and all the eternal truths of the ultimate attainments of mankind.

Mylapore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu: (Left) Throughout India the cobra is viewed as a Deity of healing. Numerous shrines, particularly in the Northeast and the South, are associated with the mounds or trees under which cobras live. Women worship at these shrines for successful childbirth and the health of family members.

Ochira, Alappuzha District, Kerala: (Below) Beneath the lateral roots of these ancient entwined trees, wooden votive healing sculptures surround the image of Parvati. When a devotee prays for healing, he or she will pick up one of the votive sculptures and, with it, circle the part of the body that needs healing. For the people of this region, Ochira is like Lourdes, and many miraculous healings take place here.



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Healing

One of the underlying popular tenets of Hinduism is the acceptance of miracles. Most Hindus believe that direct appeal for aid from a Deity often results in divine intervention. The Gods and Goddesses are approachable and, when properly beseeched, will change the course of events. Prayers for intercession may be made to any Deity, the choice entirely dependent upon the beliefs and inclinations of the devotee. Stories in every neighborhood revolve around ancestors or acquaintances whose sincere devotion resulted in the prevention of misfortune and disaster. Elements of nature such as trees or rocks are believed to possess powerful healing energy. Just touching such an object may result in a miracle.

Innumerable examples of such healings exist. For instance, at the Bedla Mataji temple just outside the city of Udaipur in Rajasthan, as many as twenty thousand devotees come for healing during the ten-day Navaratri festival each year. While making a wish to the Goddess Durga, they crawl through a short U-shaped arch of stone and clay believed to be vibrant with sacred energy. If the individual's prayer is answered, he or she will promise to return to crawl seven more times through the arch before giving substantial offerings to the Goddess. Many devotees claim that this action has resulted in miracles. At the roots of the sacred trees in Ochira, described in the story of Aditi, groupings of ancient wooden sculptures represent legs, arms and complete human figures. Years ago they were placed there to remind Parabrahman of the specific healing requested. When the miracles occurred, the objects were left behind. Devotees believe that these sculptures are now imbued with sacred healing energy. The afflicted will pick up one that pertains to that part of the body that needs attention and revolve it around the spot, accordingly absorbing divine healing.

Physical conditions in the Indian subcontinent are generally much more severe than those of Europe or North America. Disasters such as floods, famines and earthquakes are common; the climate makes it a breeding ground for contagious diseases; and overpopulation often makes living conditions oppressive. Hinduism, unlike Western religions, does not separate God from the devil. Both good and evil are viewed as divine. Both are essential parts of existence, their deeper purposes unfathomable to mankind. Siva is described as both the creator and destroyer of the universe. The wrath of His consort, Parvati, in Her form as Kali, is said to cause calamities; Her anger must be appeased through pujas. She is, however, also viewed as the nurturing mother who lovingly cares for Her devotees. Some Deities are particularly associated with disease and healing. Sitala is worshiped in North India as the Goddess of Smallpox, the Provider of Good Fortune and the Protector of Children, while Her counterpart in South India is known as Mariamman. Each of these Goddesses is believed to be both the cause and the cure of illness. A sick person will be said to be possessed by the Goddess, and special rituals must be enacted to please Her, to cool Her anger and make Her benign. The Goddess within the patient will be offered special foods believed to be Her favorites, foods that consequently ease the fever and help to heal the disease.

The first time that newborn babies are taken out of their homes in central Tamil Nadu, usually at three or six months, will be to be blessed by the Goddess. Many babies are brought by their parents to be laid in front of the image of the Goddess in Mariamman's temple in Punalur, near Thanjavur, to ensure that they are protected from harm. So many healing miracles are claimed to have occurred in this temple that it has become remarkably popular. The priests found that the congestion of milling devotees prevented them from being able to conduct normal pujas, so they relegated the more elaborate

personal rituals to a side shrine. In a courtyard, the women of each family gather to sing praises to the Goddess as they mix and roll out special sweetened rice and lentil flour balls to be given as part of their offerings for the health of their babies. Other women make special rice cakes mixed with ghee and turmeric that will be placed over the diseased part of a family member's body. A small wick in the center of the cake is lighted as an invocation to Mariamman, who is said to draw out the negative energy from the ill person and heal him or her. Many diseases, including tuberculosis, cholera and cancer, are believed to be healed in this manner.

Cobras, the most poisonous of snakes, are revered as divine agents of healing. A home inhabited by a *naga* (cobra) is believed to be lucky. The snake that is regularly prayed to and fed is said to never harm family members. Many shrines and temples have grown up around the mounds or tree roots where Nagas live, and the snakes there are given daily offerings of milk and eggs. Stone sculptures depicting hooded Nagas, sometimes with a human form beneath the hood, stand beneath many sacred trees, particularly in south India. Occasionally the image will portray two entwined snakes identical in form to the caduceus, the common symbol of western medicine. Women more commonly worship at Naga shrines than men. They make special pujas to the Nagas to pray for fertility and successful childbirth and for the health of their family members. In North India, particularly in the areas of the eastern Gangetic Plain where poisonous vipers abound, Manasa is worshiped as the Goddess of Snakes. Closely connected with the earth, fertility and marriage, She is usually depicted in human form surrounded by vipers. When someone is bitten by a snake, Manasa is worshiped to draw out the venom.

A divine image, particularly one that has been worshiped for years, may be considered to be so imbued with sacred energy that simply being in its proximity may heal disease and reverse misfortune. The longer it has been the object of worship, the more powerful it is believed to be. Many miracles, for example, are cited by pilgrims who have made the long journey to the famous temple of Srinathji (a name for Krishna) in Nathdwara, Rajasthan. They believe that the preparation for such a pilgrimage, the voyage itself, and preliminary rituals after arrival at the temple act as a means of cleansing and readying oneself for being filled with God's grace. In the course of darshan with Srinathji during puja, the undiluted power of God is viewed as purifying, healing any imperfection or misfortune.

The growth of small shrines into large temples is largely based upon the response of grateful devotees to the specific blessings received from the Deity associated with that spot. The largest temples in India, such as that of Jagganatha in Puri and Meenakshi in Madurai among hundreds of others, have gained their popularity purely through their records of achievement which include innumerable healing miracles. Many devotees returning from pujas in these places claim that their prayers have been answered. Tirumalai, the temple of Vishnu that is the richest pilgrimage center in the world, has gained all of its wealth from donations by grateful devotees. Hundreds of thousands of smaller temples, those in little communities throughout the Indian subcontinent, have their own stories of miracles that have happened in the past as well as in the present.

In general, healing is believed to come to those that deserve it. Disrespectful or inappropriate behavior (for example, the seeking of self-satisfaction at the expense of one's family or friends) is considered to demean the individual character and to create bad karma. Karma, it may be remembered, is based upon the absolute law of cause and effect, of total responsibility for one's actions. Karma is the sum of the entire character, the tally of all the good and bad acts in this life and all previous lives. Social or material inequalities are viewed, in part, as

Bedla, Udaipur District, Rajasthan: *In an ancient ritual that has been conducted on this spot for centuries, devotees in need of healing crawl through an arch of stone and clay at the Bedla Mataji Temple. Many claim efficacious cures.*



STEPHEN P. HUYLER

the natural product of past-life karma. Each individual is ultimately accountable for every choice, every action and even every thought. Selfless dedication to the duties in life—to the responsibilities undertaken by being born into this body, this family and this occupation—is considered to be a virtue, to create good karma. Countless Hindu

treatises, legends and stories extol the virtuous life. Clear-sighted commitment to the fulfillment of duty to family and Deity are the highest possible human achievement. Acts of virtue are believed to attract the positive attention and beneficence of the Gods and, when necessary, to clear a path for healing energy.



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Punalur, Thanjavur District, Tamil Nadu: (Left) In a temple to the Goddess Mariamman, a ritual to heal a woman diagnosed with severe cervical cancer includes specially made rice cakes that are placed over the afflicted area and lighted with wicks. The disease, viewed as contamination, is believed to be drawn out through the flames. The numbers of lottery tickets have been scrawled on the back wall for good luck by other devotees.

Patna Bihar: (Below) The flames of lamps illuminate the sides and back of a terracotta elephant placed in a temporary shrine of sugarcane stalks inside the courtyard of an urban home. Behind the shrine, a woman arranges offerings to the Sun God, Surya, as part of her rituals to fulfill a vow for the health of a family member.



Sacred Vows

The purpose of many Hindu rituals is to improve the balance of karma. The properly conscientious Hindu conducts regular pujas, in which the Gods are honored and extolled, as well as samskaras, in which the events of the life cycle (birth, betrothal, marriage and death, to name a few) are appropriately celebrated. Another common means of clearing the negative karma created by past mistakes in action or judgment is through the fulfillment of a *vrata*, a specific vow, to a God or Goddess. A devotee promises the Deity that he or she will regularly undergo a certain action that will help to purify body and mind and demonstrate piety.

Many *vratas* are relatively undemanding, usually involving a fast accompanied by intense prayers. A vow will be made that on the one day each week considered auspicious to that particular Deity: the devotee will go without solid food from sunrise to sunset. Regional cultures differ in the traditional attributes of each day. In North India, Monday is the day dedicated to Siva and Lakshmi, Tuesday to Hanuman, Ganesha and Kali, Wednesday to Vishnu, Thursday to personal Deities or to one's guru, Friday to the Goddess in Her many forms, Saturday to the Divine in its most powerful aspect (Siva as the De-

stroyer or Durga as the All Conquering), and Sunday to Surya. Most Hindus would make a *vrata* to fast for only one day in the week, although some might make special concessions upon another day as part of a second vow (for example, a person who regularly eats meat might vow to Vishnu to eat solely vegetarian food on Saturdays).

Any *vrata*, simple or complex, is a serious commitment to the Divine and must be enacted exactly as it was promised. Failure to do so may result in disaster. Stories abound of dishonored vows and the divine retribution that followed. If someone is incapable of honoring a sacred vow through physical impairment or death, the responsibility may be assumed by another member of the family. Although anyone may commit to a *vrata*, most are made by women. As has been stated, shakti (feminine strength) is revered in India. Women are believed to be much stronger in character and resolution than men. They are given the responsibility to keep the karmic balance of the household. The knowledge of most of the sacred traditions of home and family is passed down through the women. Although men are often involved in household pujas, it is the women who conduct almost all of the many other rituals that take place throughout each year, including

the *vratas*, fasts and other ascetic observances. A primary purpose of most of these is to lessen the burden of the family's bad karma, its toxicity, and thereby improve the status quo.

A *vrata* is a personal choice that does not require the services of a priest, Brahmana or otherwise. The rituals have been handed down in Hindu households from mother to daughter and from mothers-in-law to daughters-in-law for centuries. They are conducted by every class and community, and in every region, although they vary in form and demand according to the individual traditions of each family. Their strictures may be severe; but the rituals nevertheless encourage a freedom of artistic expression in music, dance, storytelling and poetry, artistry and craftsmanship.

During the Chhattha festival in Bihar, celebrated twice each year in February–March and October–November, women make vows to the Sun God, Surya, that if the condition of family members is improved (perhaps a disabled child will be healed or a long-unemployed husband will get a job) they will undertake annual fasts, intense prayers and physical ordeals. The honoring of such a *vrata* may require days or even weeks of intense preparation. After dark on the evening before the festival day, a votary in a typical situation will create a temporary shrine of sugarcane stalks in the courtyard of her home. Beneath it she will place a terracotta elephant, representing a gift of honor to the God. Around the sculpture she arranges baskets of offerings: co-

conuts, fruits, special leaves, cooked sweets, incense and rice. On the back of the elephant are small lamps that she fills with ghee and then lights. She will then pray to Surya, thanking Him for His blessings. For the rest of the night until just before dawn, she and all the other women in her household, will sing songs to Surya, praising him and relating stories of all the many boons that He has granted His devotees. When the sky first begins to lighten, the family members will disassemble the shrine and carry the sugarcane, elephant and all the baskets of offerings to the river. There, they set up the shrine in the shallow waters near the river bank, with the lighted elephant partially submerged. The woman who has made the vow will enter the river to her waist holding up the offerings to be blessed by the rising sun. Once her prayers are finished, she clambers ashore and the food is divided to be eaten by all of the family members. Her actions are a means for showing her gratitude to Surya, while at the same time contributing to the karmic balance of the entire family.

An individual who has suffered a misfortune may decide to make a more exacting vow requiring an action that is particularly arduous and difficult to perform. Such a *vrata* exemplifies the humility and deep respect of the devotee and should thereby bring a needed balance to negative karma and improve the situation. These vows will be made only in dire circumstances: as part of prayers for healing an incurable disease or recovery from a personal or family disaster. For example, a farmer in Bihar might pray to Surya for the successful impregnation of his wife after years of impotence and infertility. He may vow that if his prayers are answered and his wife delivers a healthy son, he will perform the following humbling task during each annual Chhattha festival for the next ten years.

First, he will stand outside his house with his hands folded in prayer and his heels touching the doorstep. Then he will prostrate himself upon the ground, stretch out his hands towards the river, pray, mark with his fingers the furthest point he can reach, stand again, and step to place his heels on that mark. He will then prostrate himself and repeat the process again and again—until he has reached the river's edge ten miles away! He will have planned so that he left the house at such a time to reach the river just at sunrise to make the appropriate puja to Surya on the day of Chhattha.

The performance of this difficult task is considered to create such positive sacred energy in the devotee that other Hindus who pass him while he is prostrate will reach to touch the hem of his clothes, thereby having his darshan and gaining some of his merit for themselves. Vows of such intensity are not rare. Many devotees to Surya in Bihar, both men and women, may be observed enacting this same ritual during the Chhattha festival. Other demanding *vratas* elsewhere might include, for example, climbing on one's knees the two thousand steps to the temple of Amba Mata on Mount Girnar in Gujarat, or annually walking barefoot for four days up a jungle path to have darshan with the God Ayyappa in Sabarimala, Kerala, or making the painstaking pilgrimage to the 15,000-foot-high sacred lake at the base of Mount Kailasa in Tibet, the legendary Himalayan abode of Siva and Parvati.

Vows may include demonstrations of piety that require body piercing or fire walking. Some Hindus prepare with long periods of fasting and prayer, while for others the act may be spontaneous. In either case, the individual is usually overcome by trance, believing that he or she is imbued with the spirit of the Deity. These devotees are compelled to show their intense devotion by, for example, piercing the tongue with a metal trident, or the back and limbs with metal spikes. Bleeding is rare: blood is a sign of impure faith. When the intrusive objects are removed, there is often no wound, no sign of a puncture. Similarly, worshipers, particularly in South India, may vow to demonstrate their abiding faith by walking barefoot across a bed of red-hot coals. Those few that are burnt by this action are considered inappropriately prepared and not graced by the Deity's spirit.



Patna, Bihar: A woman lies prostrate on the ground and stretches as far as she can reach to mark the dirt with her fingers. She rises to place her heels on that mark, prays while standing, and then prostrates herself again. In this manner she travels several miles to fulfill a vow to the Sun God, Surya. Other devotees along the way touch the hem of her sari to share the merit of her austerity.

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Manarashala, Alappuzha District, Kerala: (Above) A devotee who is possessed by the spirit of the God Subramaniam is encircled by close friends who keep him from falling while he dances in oblivion. This experience is for him the fulfillment of a vow, something that he must undertake only once during his life.

(Right) Possession by a Deity is a profoundly transformative experience. Not only is the devotee changed by his or her trance, but others who witness the possession often claim deep spiritual epiphanies.

Trance Possession

Possession by a Deity is not uncommon in India. Many festivals include members of the community that regularly become possessed to dance erratically through the crowds and to speak as oracles, giving direct messages to individuals, deciding disputes and dispensing justice. However, this intensity of belief does not necessarily exemplify zealotry. A mainstream Hindu, conservative or liberal, from any walk of life (farmer or professor, princess or sweeper, rich or poor) may be possessed by a Deity. Although this condition does not affect every Hindu, almost all families can recall at least one member who has been overcome by a spiritual trance. A trance may occur in the middle of a puja, or while singing bhajanas (devotional hymns), or in having darshan with a Deity during its procession on the street. The time and place are unpredictable. Typically, the devotee is overcome by a trance and begins to shake or roll on the ground or dance uncontrollably. He or she may mumble incoherently, or cry out the name of the Deity again and again, or deliver divine messages, often very wise, in an unaccustomed voice. The trance may last minutes, or hours, or even days. When it is over, the person is often exhausted, but elated. People who are possessed usually claim great insights and deep inner peace. Those that witness this transformation feel that they are in the presence of the Divine and that their lives are enhanced by the experience.

In some cases, possession by a Deity may be a planned and anticipated act, part of the fulfillment of a vow. Women may make vows to the Goddess Mariamman to be possessed by her spirit during her annual festival. Similarly, devotees of Subramaniam (also known as Murugan or Karttikeya, the son of Siva and Parvati and brother of Ganesha) may vow that in return for a specific request (healing or the improvement of an oppressive situation), they will become possessed by the God at least once during their lives. If the wish is granted, the devotee will honor his part of the bargain during one of Subramaniam's three annual festivals, either in the following year or on any year thereafter. Some may choose to wait decades before fulfilling their vows.

During one such festival, a group of votaries assembles at a specified spot three miles from a temple dedicated to Subramaniam. Among them is a dentist, a farmer, a computer salesman, a shopkeeper and a fisherman. Each votary brings a *kavadi*, a small domed palanquin made of sticks and brightly colored paper. The *kavadi*, symbolizing the legendary mountain of sins that the God carries on His shoulders in behalf of mankind, is placed with those of other devotees in the center of a sanctified area. Brahmana priests then conduct a puja to Subramaniam and purification rites on behalf of the devotees, tying vessels of water and offerings of food and flowers to the edges of each *kavadi*. Aside from prayers and mental readiness, the only preparation that the votary makes is to take no solid food from early morning. No mind-altering drugs are employed. Once these first rituals are finished, the chief Brahmana rings a bell to signify readiness. The

devotees then loudly call out the name of the God as they line up before the priest. The first man bows before him, touching the priest's feet and taking from him the newly blessed *kavadi* and a bunch of peacock feathers. At the moment he receives these two objects, he staggers back in trance, possessed by the God. His friends surge forward to catch him before he falls and guide him away from the line of other devotees. As they leave, another votary approaches the priest, bows to receive his *kavadi* and feathers, and collapses in trance to be supported by friends. And then the next and the next until the entire group of votaries is in trance. Each votary is surrounded by a tight ring of close friends who hold hands around him throughout the period of possession. They make sure that he does not fall as he dances completely unaware of his surroundings. The votary, his friends, family and observers all believe he is possessed by the energy of the God Subramaniam. For the next several hours he dances while carrying the *kavadi* and peacock feathers as the entire group moves three miles in slow procession to the God's temple. Spectators believe that having darshan with these devotees is meritorious. When the parade of the possessed finally reaches the temple, they dance through the compound and into the sanctum. Once there, a final puja is made to Subramaniam and the Deity is asked to leave His human vehicles to once more inhabit the central image. The vow is complete, the votaries blessed with vibrant sacred energy, and all return to their homes.

Relationships with the Divine in India are believed to be reciprocal. By giving, you receive; and when receiving, it is essential that you acknowledge the source and give something in return. Health and good fortune are the natural products of a symbiotic relationship with the Gods. Misfortune and calamity are the result of imbalance, of inappropriate behavior and misguided thoughts and actions. Balance is regained through good deeds, proper conduct, abiding faith and the appropriate honoring of one's Deities. Occasionally a devotee might be required to conduct intense rituals to demonstrate devotion and to reestablish the karmic equilibrium. In this process, miracles are viewed as common occurrences, blessings bestowed by the Gods upon faithful devotees.



ALL PHOTOS: STEPHEN P. HUYLER

The Strength of a Vow

FROM THE TEACHINGS OF SATGURU SIVAYA SUBRAMUNIASWAMI

Vrata, taking of sacred vows, is the eighth *niyama* and something every Hindu must do at one time or another during his lifetime. The *brahmacharya vrata* is the first, pledging to maintain virginity until marriage. The *vivaha vrata*, marriage vows, would generally be the next. Taking a vow, a *vrata*, is a sacred trust between yourself, your outer self, your inner self, your loved ones and closest friends. Even though they may not know of the vow you may have taken, it would be difficult to look them straight in the eye if you yourself know you have let yourself down. A vow is a sacred trust between you and your guardian devas, the devas that surround the temple you most frequent and the Mahadevas, who live within the Third World—which you live in, too, in your deep, innermost mind, in the radiant, self-luminous body of your soul.

Many people make little promises and break them. This is not a *vrata*, a sacred trust. A *vrata* is a sacred trust with God, Gods and guru made at a most auspicious time in one's life. *Vrata* is a binding force, binding the external mind to the soul and the soul to the Divine, though *vrata* is sometimes defined generally as following religious virtues or observances, following the principles of the Vedas, of the Hindu Dharma. There are *vratas* of many kinds, on many different levels, from the simple promise we make to ourself and our religious community and guru to perform the basic spiritual obligations, to the most specific religious vows.

Vratas give the strength to withstand the temptations of the instinctive forces that naturally come up as one goes on through life—not to suppress them but to rechannel them into a lifestyle fully in accord with the *yamas* and *niyamas*.

There are certain simple vows in Hinduism which are easy to take and often are taken, such as, "If I'm successful in this business dealing, I will give twenty percent of the profits to my temple." Or, "If my spouse comes back to me, I shall always obey the *stri* dharma principles (or *purusha* dharma), be dedicated and devoted always." "If my dear mother, who is so devoted to my children, lives through her cancer operation (and Lord Ganesha, the doctors have said the chances are not good), you will see me at the temple every Friday without fail. This is my *vrata*, Lord Ganesha, and I say no more." We take vows to change our ways, vows to meditate daily, vows to desist from lying, vows to not eat meat, vows to remain celibate, vows to obey the guru and his tradition, vows to follow these *yamas* and *niyamas*.

Perhaps the most obvious and important vow, which can be taken most readily and renewed once a year on a day which you consider your most sacred day—such as Sivaratri, Ganesha Chaturthi, Skanda Shashthi or Dipavali—is the *yama* and *niyama vrata*. These twenty restraints and practices are easy to memorize. Commit them to memory. The *vrata* should go like this: "O Lord Ganesha, open the portals of my wisdom that I might take this *vrata* with open heart and clear mind.

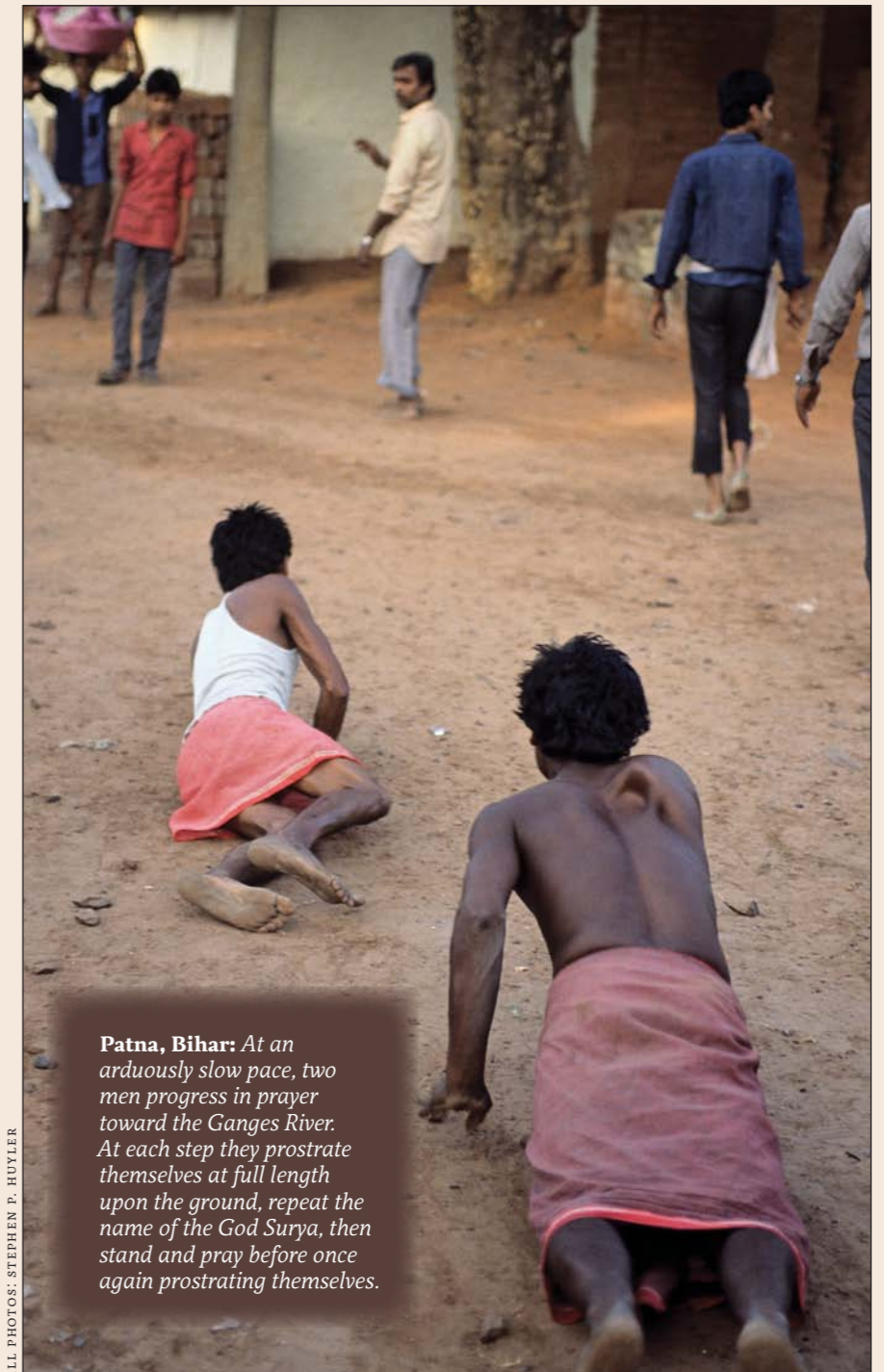
O Lord Murugan, give me the will, fortitude and renewed strength every step of the way to fulfill the *vrata* that I am taking. O Lord Siva, forgive me if I fail, for these twenty restraints and practices are truly beyond my ability to perfectly uphold. So, this first year, Lord Siva, I vow to fulfill these lofty ideals, to the best of my ability, at least fifty percent. I know I am weak. You know I am weak. I know you will make me strong. I know that you are drawing me ever patiently toward your holy feet. But, Lord Siva, next year I will faithfully renew this *vrata*, this sacred vow, to these rules, these observances. And if I have succeeded in fulfilling my meager fifty percent according to my conscience, that shall increase my dedication and devotion to you, Lord Siva, and I shall determine to fulfill the *yamas* and *niyamas* in my life and soul seventy-five percent or more."

Many people feel that when they don't fulfill their *vrata* they have failed. One practical example to the contrary is Mahatma Gandhi, who took a vow to be celibate but broke it many times, yet continued the effort and ultimately conquered his instinctive nature. In taking a *vrata*, at the moment it is heard by priests, elders and all community members, when one hears oneself taking it, and all three worlds rejoice, a balanced scale has been created. Success is on one side, failure on the other. One or the other will win out. This is where the unreserved worship of Lord Murugan will help overbalance the scale on the success side. But if the scale teeters and wavers, the blessings and knowledge of the elders of the community should be sought: the mothers and

fathers, the old aunties and uncles, the priests, the pandits and sages, the rishis and gurus. This and this alone will steady the balance. But if actual failure occurs, Lord Ganesha Himself will catch the fall in His four arms and trunk. He will hold the devotee from going into the abyss of remorse of the darkness of the lower worlds. He will speak softly into the right ear and encourage that the *vrata* be immediately renewed, lest time elapse and the asura of depression take over mind, body and emotion. Yes, the only failure is that experienced by the one who quits, gives up, turns his back on the path and walks the other way, into the realms of darkness, beyond even the reach of the Gods. As Tiruvalluvar said, it is better to strive to fulfill great aspirations, even if you fail, than to achieve minor goals in life. Yes, this is very true.



Calcutta, West Bengal: A driver offers lighted incense to the Goddess Kali as a part of daily prayers to protect his vehicle.



Patna, Bihar: At an arduously slow pace, two men progress in prayer toward the Ganges River. At each step they prostrate themselves at full length upon the ground, repeat the name of the God Surya, then stand and pray before once again prostrating themselves.

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HINDU RENAISSANCE

The Mauritian Miracle

How the Hindus of Mauritius uplifted themselves, transformed their nation and became models for the world

BY VEL MAHALINGUM

IT HAS BEEN MY JOY AND THAT OF MY FELLOW Mauritians to be part of a dynamic revival of Hinduism in my country. The changes, positive and deep, affect our Hindu community and even our nation. Looking back 30 years, we see amazing change—a miraculous event, I am tempted to say. What began with an initiative from the Hindu Mauritian population was shaped by an energetic response by holy men and flourished with the blessings of our Gods.

In the dark days of the 1970s and 1980s, conversion from Hinduism to missionary faiths was rampant. Hindus fell easy victims to aggressive, often devious, proselytizing methods. The seeds of doubt were sown and watered every day as anti-Hindu ideas fluttered around, creeping into our minds. Resolute Hindus had few reasons to justify any hope, and a pervasive discouragement was setting in.

But in 1980, one of our elders, Retnon Velvindron, posted an impassioned letter to Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, publisher of HINDUISM TODAY. Velvindron explained the situation and begged the Hawaii-based *satguru* to come help our community. Gurudeva—as Subramuniyaswami was affectionately known—responded right away, making two visits in quick succession and bringing a message to all Mauritians.

Subramuniyaswami beckoned, “Learn your religion well; build walls of intelligence around yourselves and your community. Understand the treasure you possess so well that no one can convince you otherwise. Be clear in your beliefs. Put the tenets into practice so you experience directly the blessings that are your birthright. Then, when converters come to your door, tell them, ‘I am sure your religion is a good one, but I also have a wonderful religion that fulfills me entirely. Thank you very much and good bye.’” He spoke to us like that, so simply, so directly and with such power. It was something new, a message we had never heard before. One person observed, even back then, “He has just made us conversion-proof.”

Hinduism classes were soon established throughout the country, bringing the blessed understanding we needed. Here were the bricks for our wall of intelligence. Word spread quickly, especially about truths that countered awful misrepresentations of Hinduism that had hurt us for a long time. To the accusation that “Hindus worship stone,” we learned the answer: “We don’t worship stones! We worship God who, during *puja*, hovers in and around the *murti*. The *murti* is like a telephone we use to speak to someone—only a fool would think we are speaking to the telephone!” We suddenly had in our hands powerful teachings everyone could understand—and



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they spread like wildfire.

I can best relate the collective impact of the Hindu Renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s in Mauritius by focusing on my own guru’s work. Being Gurudeva’s disciple from the time of his first visit, I have naturally been in a good position to observe how he affected our community and country—how a guru works through his disciples to shed blessings over the land.

With proper study of spiritual books, layer after layer of our great religion was revealed to us common Hindus. Life-long religious practices took on new meanings and gave us fresh new goals, for we finally knew where we are headed.

We understood that we are all souls on a wondrous journey toward our full bloom. Not

just us Hindus, but all of us: no one will be left out. God loves all of His children without exception. There is no eternal hell, no devil opposing God. God is everywhere, in everyone. We came to earth to realize our oneness with Him. These concepts were music from heaven, so fresh, so bright, so freeing they were. We were strengthened from the inside—suddenly lifted high.

The classes Gurudeva started continue to this day—as does the grassroots enthusiasm he ignited. We now have teachers training teachers. We have classes for children using a course for children conceived by Gurudeva. And there is demand for more.

Along with the teachings, Gurudeva brought practice of Hindu precepts into our lives—in a way that was often challenging. We are still struggling with some of his instructions, his high standards of *sadhana* and purity, but mostly we have done well. Our efforts, though fallible, proved transformative.

Gurudeva often said he foresaw a great future for Mauritius, and he urged us to strive for prosperity, to modernize and take advantage of new technologies. At the time of his first visit, in 1981, we

were a poor country, one-million-plus people on a little island with only a sugar monoculture to our name. It was quite a shift he was advocating.

The tools we received from him were both mystical and practical. He taught us to visualize abundance and to create it by repeating affirmations, thus molding our minds. He emphasized proper budgeting and financial responsibility. He required his close devotees to tithe (giving one tenth of one’s income to a good cause) so as to open the inner doors of generosity and abundance in accordance to the infallible law of karma. He urged strict honesty in business dealings, tolerating no bribery or deceit—and bribery, truth be told, was

a dark blemish of our culture that we had to work hard to shed. At times, it has taken courage to follow Gurudeva. But we, his closest followers, did it, bringing enormous rewards. We are now regarded as upright people who live *dharmically* and do not compromise on principle.

Today, our Hindu community prospers. All of Mauritius prospers and is recognized as a country that is moderately well off—a huge step forward. Virtually everyone now is fully conversant with digital tools. We surprise ourselves with what we can afford these days, and Mauritian well-being and contentment are at an all-time high.

And so, today, when I say conversion has now died down and nearly disappeared from the land, I feel I am dreaming. It could only have happened by the grace of our great Gods. I am sure they heard our desperate prayers.

How Hindus became better Hindus

Subramuniyaswami, my Gurudeva, was not the only one who answered our plea. The Gods who heard us responded by sending powerful saints and swamis to these remote shores. Among them were Ma Amritanandamayi, Swami Chinmayananda, emissaries from Satya Sai Baba, Divine Life Society and the Ramakrishna Mission—each bringing his own tradition, generating enthusiasm, pouring out the teachings, and giving us back our pride and self-confidence.

When a holy man like Gurudeva said something to us, it went deep. In doing as he directed, there came a power which transformed us and our circumstances. That power, I am convinced, radiated out and helped others to also do the right thing.

Following the thrust of the guru often required strong commitments. Gurudeva embraced all Mauritian Hindus with equal love, but asked those who wanted to be his close devotees not only to bear Hindu names, but names from his particular Saivite denomination. If the devotee’s name did not fit, he was to change it—legally. Mauritian family ties being so strong, this was a tall order. Gurudeva explained that Hinduism is composed of four principal sects (Smarta, Vaishnava, Saiva and Shakta) with important similarities and differences. Since we identify with our name, we needed a name that truly says, to ourself first, who we are. Much soul-searching ensued.

My family name used to be Renghen, a Vaishnava name. Finding myself thoroughly Saivite, I changed it to Mahalingum, which means a lot to me. Each time I hear it, I picture our most sacred icon, which represents to me my ultimate purpose and destiny. Now when I say, “I am a Hindu,” I know exactly what I mean, precisely what beliefs I hold, where I am going and how I am getting there. The community at large takes note of the strength our names give us, and one of the results, today, is that Mauritian Hindus no longer give Western nick-names to their children, as they used to do.

Our cultural identity was also affected by this profound change. Previously, Hindu clothes were what poor Mauritians wore and therefore carried little prestige. Rich, educated Mauritians wore European suits, so unfit and awkward for our climate, but an external sign of prosperity. It was, however, also a token of cultural submission. In this, too, Gurudeva blazed a new trail, asking us to proudly and unhesitatingly proclaim our Hinduness in the silent but tangible language of clothing. It has caught on in a big way, and today you’ll see Gurudeva’s *shishyas* coming to temples only dressed in elegant Hindu clothes. These make us feel good, and our appearance definitely creates respect for Hindus and Hinduism.

Lord Ganesha comes to Mauritius

Devotion needs sacred spaces to be fully practiced

by the devout. Chief among them are temples, and several were founded in the last two decades in Mauritius. Dear to my heart is the Spiritual Park in Riviere du Rempart, a peaceful and naturally beautiful haven by the Indian Ocean founded by Gurudeva. It is not a temple, but has a powerful shrine to Lord Ganesha as Pan-chamukha Ganapati. It is a one-of-a-kind, wooden shrine built in the Kerala style with thatched roof, the first ever crafted outside of India. In it a majestic eight-foot-tall, five-faced, ten-armed Ganapati looks over azure blue seas facing India—a towering reminder of the original home of the nation’s Hindus.

The Spiritual Park started with a vision Gurudeva had of Ganesha in 1986, and as we learned both in theory and in practice, such endeavors are blessed from the start and carry a power of their own. In that same year Gurudeva acquired this riverside property as a monastery and converted the chalet-style bungalow on the west side into a monastic residence, where his monks lived and served. A few years later, he dedicated six acres of his Saiva Dharmasala as a place of worship and contemplation. In 1999 he traveled to Mauritius to publicly inaugurate the Spiritual Park as a gift to the island nation.

Celebrating Hinduism: (top to bottom) Subramuniyaswami is welcomed by Mauritian elders in 1982; Much had changed in Mauritius by the time of Gurudeva’s later visits in the 1990s



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People who go there to worship Ganesha look splendid in their Hindu attire. Every month more than 3,000 people from all over the island gather there, women in colorful saris, men in elegantly embroidered kurtas. We have become proud of our heritage, and what a rich one it is.

Ganesha has always been important to our particular community, with Marathi origins, but the rest of us did not know Him well. Gurudeva taught that Ganesha belongs to, and unifies, all Hindus. We can attest to that, as ever more Hindus of every denomination, every community, and even non-Hindus come to worship Him at the Spiritual Park. No other society in Mauritius attracts so many people every month.

Today, Ganesha Chaturthi is celebrated with great pomp by all of our Hindu communities, not only the Marathis. A record-breaking and euphoric 8,000 people attended our last Ganesha Chaturthi celebrations at the Spiritual Park in 2009.

Ancient mysticism in daily life

The Spiritual Park was consecrated as one of the rare places on earth today where an ancient tantra is practiced, that of writing prayers that are offered into the *homa* fire. This is a means of communication between the inner and outer worlds, as devonic helpers pick up the prayers and carefully ponder and act on every request. This has become popular at each homa—which happens on the first Sunday of every month—when thousands of prayers are offered into the fire. The results are remarkable, people's lives are changed and at each gathering testimonials abound.

At home we learned to perform a simple Ganesha puja that any-

one can do. Today, many Mauritians celebrate that puja faithfully, every day, and enjoy the blessings that ensue. Mature Hindus who are vegetarian and not too prone to anger were encouraged by Gurudeva to do the more elaborate *atmartha puja* in their home shrine. These pujas also have now spread far and wide. Many Hindus who used to unceremoniously get up in the morning, put on their coat and tie and dash off to work, now rise earlier, don their *veshtis* or *dhoties* and do their puja followed by sadhana and meditation. The whole vibration of their home is transformed and those they meet during the day absorb some of the peace. Neighbors notice and soon start doing the puja themselves, bringing more blessings into their life, and contributing to the general uplift. Certainly, this augurs well for the future of Hinduism and Mauritius.

In my Marathi culture, as it is common to most Hindus, we have always had lots of temples that were the heart of our communities. All that we did, all that we were and strived to be, revolved around the temple. My grandfather was a pandaram priest and we were steeped in temple lore. Yet, something was missing. Tradition had become dogma and the true meanings of many practices were forgotten. Again, Gurudeva filled the gap. He explained the temple's esoterics, just how these holy shrines open channels of communication to our great Gods, and how we can take advantage of our temple for a sublime life.

I remember his phrase, "Temples provide food for the soul," each time I go to a temple. These clear explanations, combined with our natural *bhakti*, redoubled our love of temples. We already had so many—and yet we have built more and upgraded our old ones. We have acquired larger, finer *murtis* from India. More and more priests from India are living among us and conducting special rituals. Probably not coincidentally, many of the temples Gurudeva visited have since been rebuilt, some of them as exquisite Agamic gems.

Grace and boons from the Guru

I would most humbly suggest that anyone pondering how to uplift his community or country take note of our experience. By the grace of Gods and guru, we have been able to pull ourselves up. I believe sister and brother Hindus everywhere can benefit from the lessons we learned—even if they are already in a good situation, for there is always more to do.

One of the powers of the guru, we found, is to bestow spiritual treasures, almost endlessly, on those devotees who respond to his instructions. But they are not always easy to follow. Mauritian Hindus have, overall, responded well to Gurudeva's instructions, but there

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Thousands strong: (left) The majestic 108-foot-tall murti of Lord Siva at Grand Bassin (below) vibrant temples like this one, the Belle Vue Maurel Murugan Temple, have become a common sight



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A Renaissance in colors: (right) The Maha Panchamukha Ganapati is the main Deity presiding over the Spiritual Park; at His feet, the next generation of Hindus sings bhajans

are a few areas where we are having difficulty.

Gurudeva was shocked to find so many of us sending our children to Catholic schools. With Catholic impressions in their young minds, he explained, it will be nearly impossible for them to be clear-minded Hindus later on, and they will be easy to convert. "Stop this at once," he pleaded. But today, unfortunately, Catholic schools are still irresistible to many Hindus, and children still spend their delicate, formative years in a Catholic atmosphere.

Some courageous ones I know did pull their children out. Were their children deprived of a good education? No. Those they grew up very well, have all gone on to fine universities and become competent professionals. Our public schools are excellent, and I am convinced it is just a matter of time until on our community realizes there is no justification for subjecting the children to contrary beliefs.

Another challenging directive from Gurudeva was for married women among his *shishyas* not to hold jobs. He patiently delineated the many benefits that far outweigh the extra income. His basic idea was to protect the family from the many forces that work against it today. When a mother is able to spend time managing her home, peace and harmony are more likely to come. But many fear economic hardship, or the wife fears she will be bored, or have a lesser self-image.

Close devotees of Gurudeva have made this adjustment and are all very happy. One, for example, was a professional career woman who caught on to the importance of this teaching and abandoned her career. Today her children are happy, her husband is happy, and so is she—far from being bored. She volunteers her spare time to teach Hinduism to children, has time for consistent sadhana and meditation, and says that her life is now much more interesting and fulfilling than before.

Though the community is moving slowly on these difficult points, I think that, as sadhana, meditation and the worship of Ganesha continue to grow, slowly more and more families will better be able to evaluate the various options for their life and make good choices.

Gurudeva revealed to us many of Hinduism's potent and magical facets—not always through explanation, but often by what he did all over the world and what he represented. These paradigms continue to capture our imaginations. His life and his monastery remind us, deep within, of our legends of old. But we have HINDUISM TODAY to prove that it all really does exist, and in the magazine's pages we constantly rediscover the magnificence of our religion and the breathtaking renaissance of the Hindu world.

Take Swami Gopal Sharan Devacharya, for example, the 2009 Hindu of the Year. As former British subjects, we were quite struck with the image of his putting a shawl on the Queen's shoulders. How else would we know even of the existence of modern Hindu heroes, if



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not for HINDUISM TODAY?

Even in his passing, Gurudeva empowered us. He allowed us to see, in the person of his successor Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami, the power of the guru transferred from one generation to the next. We can now be confident that Hinduism here will move from strength to strength. Twenty years from now, a new generation of Mauritians will tell, probably in these same pages, about wondrous new developments that, in 2010, no one could have imagined.

I hope these humble thoughts may encourage other devotees to trust the power of their own guru. It will enrich all of us. For there is really only one guru—as my guru taught us—and we are indescribably blessed to have known him in the person of my Gurudeva.

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BRAHMACHARI VEL MAHALINGUM, 55, is a successful businessman in Mahebourg, Mauritius, where his family runs a bakery and a sari shop. This piece is translated from the original French.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Games of India

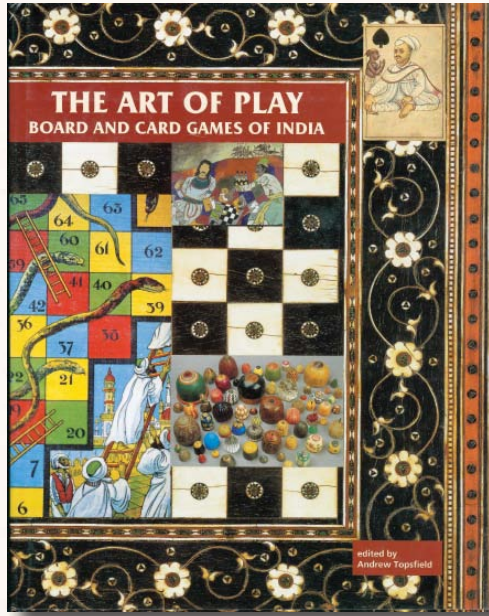
BY TARA KATIR, WASHINGTON, USA

THIS COFFEE-TABLE BOOK FROM Marg Publications in Mumbai, *The Art of Play, Board and Card Games of India*, is a colorful and informed exploration of ancient India's most popular games. Many are still with us: most notably, chess, backgammon, pachisi and snakes and ladders.

The Art of Play comprises eleven essays contributed by scholars and museum curators under the guidance of editor Andrew Topsfield, curator of Indian Art at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Each essay is devoted to specific games, their playing pieces and surfaces as well as the many stories associated with them.

The game of chess is generally believed to have originated on the Indian subcontinent. Pratapaditya Pal, General Editor of Marg Publications and formerly Senior Curator of Indian and Southeast Asian Art at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, writes, "While the literary evidence is scanty, the archaeological remains that can be considered to have an association with chess do seem to push the history of the game at least to the 1st century bce." In Topsfield's introductory essay, he writes that chess was once used to teach the military arts of strategy. "Chess is indeed one of India's most far-reaching and enduring contributions to world culture. Having conquered Europe via Persia and the Islamic world a thousand years ago, it still remains—in its 15th century modified European form—the leading global board game of skill."

I. L. Finkel's essay on chaupar or pachisi, includes photographs of the huge outdoor game board devoted to chaupar in Fatehpur Sikri, along with crystal game pieces and a



velvet board intricately embroidered in gold thread. They are enduring evidence of the fervor and artistic skills devoted to the game. Pachisi, a racing game, figures at the central moment in the *Mahabharata*, where Shakuni cheats Yudhishtira out of his kingdom and his wife in the gambling game, setting in motion the epic's entire drama.

I was fascinated by the history of the game that Westerners call Snakes and Ladders. Known by its original name as Gyan Chaupar, the Game of Knowledge, it imparted the philosophical teachings of Jainism, Hinduism or Islam, depending upon the game board on which one played. Players set out on a spiritual path, landing on squares which either speeded their progress (ladders) or hindered it (snakes). The early European version of Gyan Chaupar appeared in the 1890s and was adapted to reflect Victorian social and ethical mores. The plain, numerical boards we see today are the product of the 1940s and their wartime economic restrictions. This contemporary version is a plain cousin to the philosophically rich and colorful boards of the past.

The many color photos of various playing surfaces, game pieces and wooden boxes with which to store games are visually stunning. They are made more so because of the obvious skills of the artisans who created these utilitarian items. For readers who are keen to delve more deeply into the history of games, each essay concludes with exhaustive notes listing resources for further reading. Check out *The Art of Play*; you will not be disappointed.

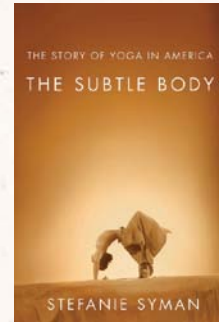
THE ART OF PLAY, BOARD AND CARD GAMES OF INDIA, EDITOR ANDREW TOPSFIELD, MARG PUBLICATIONS, 24 HOMI MODY STREET, MUMBAI, INDIA 4000 001. DECEMBER 2006. US \$66.00. WWW.MARG-ART.ORG. 168 PAGES.

History of Yoga in USA

STEFANIE SYMAN'S HISTORICAL ACCOUNT, *The Story of Yoga in America: The Subtle Body*, is a well-researched account of Hindu influence in America. She begins with Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau, whose taste for Indian philosophy is well known. She goes on through figures known (Swami Vivekananda) and unknown (Pierre A. Bernard), each of whom had great influence in their time. Who knows that Margaret Woodrow Wilson, eldest daughter of America's 28th president, moved to Pondicherry in the late 1930s to live at the ashram of Sri Aurobindo? Her move prompted a story headlined "Daughter of Wilson Turns Hindu."

Syman proceeds systematically through the hippie movement, the advent of Indian swamis in the 60s and 70s and the popularization—and commercialization—of "yoga" that we see today. Her storytelling is engaging, if at times a bit gossipy. The book is a useful read for those wanting to understand the evolution of yoga in the US and how this influences the public perception of Hinduism in the country today.

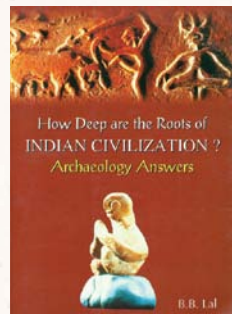
THE SUBTLE BODY, THE STORY OF YOGA IN AMERICA, BY STEFANIE SYMAN, FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX, 18 WEST 18TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10011. FIRST EDITION, 2010. US\$27.00. WWW.FSGBOOKS.COM. 400 PAGES



Roots of Our Culture

IN A NEW LOOK AT ANCIENT INDIA we have Professor B.B. Lal's most recent book, *How Deep are the Roots of Indian Civilization? Archaeology Answers*, published by Aryan Books International, New Delhi, India, 2009. Well known in the scholarly world, Professor Lal says of this latest book that

"An attempt has been made to avoid scholarly jargons." He succeeded admirably and has produced a fascinating archaeological



treatise on ancient India for the non-archaeologist.

"Various cultural features of the Harappan Civilization that survived the onslaughts of nearly 5,000 years can be discerned in one way or another in the life of the common people, particularly in the countryside," writes Professor Lal. Make-up, personal ornaments, agricultural practices, cooking, bedtime stories, religion, town planning and game playing (yes, chess and pachisi!) are a few of the subjects he ties directly to ancient India. To illustrate the point, Professor Lal draws direct comparisons from social and agricultural practices of the past to identical counterparts still in use today. His inclusion of color and black-and-white photographs of artifacts and their corresponding modern equivalent provides astonishing evidence of India's 5,000-year-old culture.

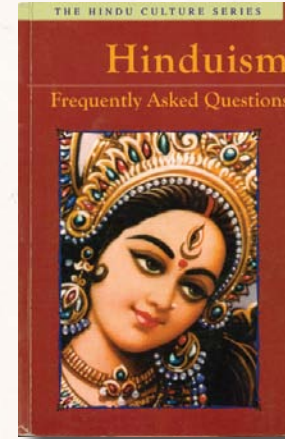
Professor Lal discusses the Aryan Invasion and Aryan Immigration theories espoused by some and concludes that both concepts are false. He states that question of "which civilization flourished in this very area prior to 2000 BCE, the inescapable answer will have to be the Harappan Civilization. It is abundantly clear that the authors of the Harappan Civilization were none else than the Vedic people themselves." For readers interested in pursuing a more extensive exploration into the archaeological evidence of ancient India, a bibliography is included. Whether you are a budding archaeology student or a curious layman, Professor Lal's scholarship shows us that ancient India is alive in the present.

HOW DEEP ARE THE ROOTS OF INDIAN CIVILIZATION? ARCHAEOLOGY ANSWERS BY B.B. LAL. ARYAN BOOKS INT., POOJA APARTMENTS, 4B ANSARI ROAD, NEW DELHI, INDIA, 110 002. 2009. RS. 390. ARYANBOOKS@VSNL.COM. 150 PAGES

Three Books On Hinduism

WE RECEIVED THREE BOOKS ALL WRITTEN with the same objective: to provide explanations of things Hindu for Hindus and non-Hindus alike. The first is Chinmaya Mission's *Hinduism, Frequently Asked Questions*. From fundamental concepts such as the Hindu concept of God, scriptures, karma, mantras, worship and guru to a Sanskrit pronunciation guide, this little book not only offers answers to questions you may have, but also establishes a foundation from which to pursue a deeper study of the religion.

A total of 89 questions are answered, in-



Hinduism. This differs in part from the Chinmaya Mission book in answering many cultural and practical questions, such as about weddings, samskaras, pilgrimage, etc. Questions range from simple topics, such as why couples change their seating during the marriage ceremony, to deeply mystical queries on yantras.

The third book is by Sadhu Mukundcharanda of the Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha or BAPS. *Hindu Rites and Rituals*, therefore, mostly reflects the rituals and beliefs as expressed through this particular lineage. Many color photos illustrate the dharmic life under the umbrella of the BAPS sampradaya. In a most profound way, this book is an homage to their guru, Sri Pramukh Swami Maharaj, while concurrently being an excellent resource for Hindu rites and philosophy for anyone. BAPS members are strict vegetarians, and Sadhu Mukundcharanda includes vegetarian recipes and cooking tips.

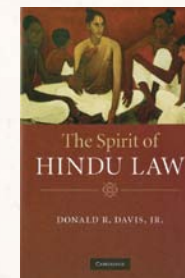
HINDUISM, FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS, THE HINDU CULTURE SERIES BY CHINMAYA PUBLICATIONS, 560 BRIDGETOWN PIKE, LANGHORNE, PA 19053. US \$7.00. FIRST EDITION, AUGUST 2006 USA. WWW.CHINMAYAMMISSION.ORG; PUBLICATIONS@CHINMAYAMMISSION.ORG. 110 PAGES

HINDU RITES, RITUALS, CUSTOMS AND TRADITIONS, PREM P. BHALLA, HINDOLOGY BOOKS, J-3/16, DARYAGANJ, DELHI, INDIA 110002. RS 250. 2007. WWW.PUSTAKMAHAL.COM. 326 PAGES

HINDU RITES & RITUALS BY SADHU MUKUNDCHARANDAS, BAPS SWAMINARAYAN AKSHARPITH, SHAHIBAUG, AMDAVAL 4, INDIA. RS. 350. 2007. 512 PAGES

Hindu Law

THIS IS AN ACADEMIC BOOK WITH AN ACADEMIC price—\$US85 for 194 pages, no illustrations. You can, however, download it to your Kindle for \$54.40—but then you can't resell it later. Price aside, we include *The Spirit of Hindu Law* in our reviews because it portends a new stan-



cluding: What is the aim of the Hindu religion? What is the role of rituals in religion? and What is meditation? These are answered simply, sometimes in Swami Chinmayananda's own words, and address common misunderstandings.

Hindu Rites, Rituals, Customs & Traditions – A to Z on the Hindu Way of Life by Prem P. Bhalla, Hindology Books, New Delhi, India, 2007, is an encyclopedic collection of questions and answers about

dard in American academic books on things Hindu—well researched, thoughtful, and lacking the cheap shots and demeaning remarks that still are found in publications coming even from major US universities.

Dr. Donald Davis' method is to analyze various principles of Hindu law and to see how the approach of the *Dharma Shastras* might inform current concepts and understanding of "law." At the outset he questions the supposedly secular nature of modern law, pointing out that theological premises regarding ordinary life are more implicit in our laws than is commonly recognized.

He does offer criticism of the Hindu system, specifically that the lower classes are largely absent from its purview. But in doing so, he seems to ignore that law at the village level, the panchayat, encompasses all castes. This system, perhaps not fully reflected in the Sanskrit *Dharma Shastras*, was disrupted by the imposition of British courts. Under the court system, the poor truly were left out, for lack of money—as they are to this day.

In his concluding remarks, Davis shares what he likes best about Hindu law: that *dharma* is a broader concept than what is usually meant by *law* in the West. As he puts it, "The tradition insists that law knows no bounds, that everything in human life is part of law's scope.... Hindu law (i.e. dharma) reverses the usual description of law, as an institution that merely controls human behavior, by describing law rather as primarily an institution that makes human flourishing possible."

THE SPIRIT OF HINDU LAW, BY DONALD R. DAVIS, JR., CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 32 AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, NY, NY 10013, USA. US\$85.00. FIRST EDITION, 2010. WWW.CAMBRIDGE.ORG. 194 PAGES

India's Gift to the World

SWAMI JYOTIRMAYANANDA spends many months each year in the US, and his latest book, *India's Gift to the World is the Light Spiritual*, is a collection of his papers given at various annual conferences on Hinduism held here. Topics range from "Realizing Swami Vivekananda's Dream of Unity" to "Relevance of Hindu Dharma for the Modern World" and "The Media's War on Hindu Dharma." Also included are a few talks on the same subjects by Swami Dayananda Saraswati of Arsha Vidya Gurukulam.

INDIA'S GIFT TO THE WORLD IS THE LIGHT SPIRITUAL, BY SWAMI JYOTIRMAYANANDA, 185 ANNA SALAI, CHENNAI 600 002, INDIA. FIRST EDITION, 2009. SWAMIJYOTI@VIVEKANANDACOSPEL.ORG. 238 PAGES





A Mystical Masterpiece Is Unearthed

One of mankind's deepest esoteric treatises boasts a new English translation. Long hidden, will it be restored to its rightful place among Hindu scriptures?

THE WORLD IS AWASH IN YOGA, IN laughing yoga and hot yoga, in five-star spa yoga, weight-loss yoga and birthing yoga. But few know the authentic sources, and fewer still dive into them. One such source, long sequestered in its original Tamil and a singular broken English attempt, has been freed from obscurity. The *Tirumandiram*, the mystical classic by Tamil Saint Tirumular, was released at a gala celebration in Chennai, India, on January 17, 2010. The ten-volume edition was produced by a team of eminent scholars under the direction of Dr. T. N. Ganapathy, sponsored by Marshall Govindan Satchidananda, President of Babaji's Kriya Yoga Order of Acharyas. The ceremony's guest list was a testimony to the importance of this text, including heads of the Saiva monasteries at Dharmapuram, Tiruvavaduthurai, and Tiruppanandal, and the Union Home Minister, Sri P. Chidambaram.

There is good reason to celebrate. The translation is of excellent quality and the printing is competent. The books have the merit of being precise in the rendering of Tirumular's Tamil into English, taking a neutral, balanced stand on issues of philosophical interpretation.

There had been previous versions of the *Tirumandiram* (also spelled *Tirumantiram*) in English, but with different goals in the translations. Marshall Govindan tells the story in the introduction, "The *Tirumandiram* is one of the first texts to emerge in the West from the gold mine of ancient Tamil literature, which until recently has been bypassed by scholars outside of South India. While the Sanskrit literature has been mined and studied by Western scholars for more than 200 years, the ancient Tamil language literature has been largely ignored. Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami,

An elegant rendition: (right) For each mandiram, or verse, the book presents the original Tamil script, a transliteration, the English translation and a commentary

founder of HINDUISM TODAY and the Saiva Siddhanta Church in Hawaii, USA, commissioned the late Dr. B. Natarajan to translate the *Tirumandiram* in the 1980s.... However, the need for a more accurate translation became apparent as Tamil speaking specialists pointed out that Dr. B. Natarajan had too often sacrificed precision for poetic grace."

Truly, Dr. Natarajan's previous translation mostly resulted from devotion. He was no specialist in linguistics or the esoterics of yoga, being an economist by profession, a brilliant man who boldly undertook a momentous task. But in a book such as the *Tirumandiram*, written by a sage of the highest attainments, there are many layers of meaning in each verse, and secrets apparent only to the initiated, refinements that are elusive and sometimes cryptic.

Marshall explained, "It became apparent that the non-specialist would need a running commentary along with translation, in order to easily understand the meaning and

significance of most of the verses. This present work fulfills this need and several others."

A Monumental Effort

Dr. T. N. Ganapathy, the team leader, is a widely respected expert in Siddha philosophy. He was the now retired Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda College, Chennai. Dr. Ganapathy's works are impressive in their breadth, discoursing on themes from Immanuel Kant (one of his bailiwicks) to Bertrand Russell and the Tamil Siddhas. He is at present the Director of the Yoga Siddha Research Project in Chennai, India.

His team of translators included T. V. Venkataraman, T. N. Ramachandran, K. R. Arumugam, P. S. Somasundaram and S. N. Kandaswami, all respected scholars. The book's appendix brings two points of view on monism and dualism in Saiva Siddhanta, one by Sivaya Subramuniyaswami and another by T. N. Arunachalam, along with a chart on the thirty-six *tattvas* by Georg Feuerstein.

It was not an easy task. "The foremost difficulty was finding competent translators among the Tamil-speaking scholars on this subject," explains Dr. Ganapathy. "The goal was so demanding that it made me stagger at times—myself being seventy-eight years young—and also made me wonder whether I was attempting the impossible."

He continues, "My concern about the feasibility of bringing out this series with commentary was due to two factors. One was the technical challenges that old Tamil grammar presented. The other was that certain Saivites object to the writing of a commentary, especially in English, on the sacred text of the *Tirumandiram*, the only *Tirumurai* (sacred Tamil Saiva scripture) that is both a *cāttiram* (philosophical treatise) and a *tottiram* (devotional literary product). This traditionalist view is supported in one of the verses by Tirumular himself: 'Oh! Fools are they who try to describe the indescribable / How can one explain the One that is boundless?'"

"But there is also a statement in the *Tirumandiram* that can be interpreted as favorable to our task, which reads, 'The Lord with the matted locks stood blemishless / To those whose mind is like a waveless sea.' How can the Boundless One be bound in translations and commentaries? Tirumular provides the answer: only those with a clear mind, that is, a waveless mind like the calm deep sea, can comprehend it. Though the translators and commentators claim no such mind, we seek and obtain protection in the words of Tirumular."

So, is the commentary authoritative? Not exactly, says Dr. Ganapathy. "The commentaries are meant to be guides, pointing to the goal, to the essence, but themselves are unrealized, mere descriptions of truth." By keeping the translation as crystalline as they could, and relegating all speculation and scholarly analysis to the commentary, the translators created a book that will be interesting to several different audiences, from the expert scholar or the initiated mystic to the beginning student of South Indian mysticism.

However impossible it might have seemed, the task is now finished. Dr. Ganapathy states in the introduction, "In bringing out the entire Tamil text in translation, saint Cekkilar's words come before me: 'Though impossible to reach its limit / Insatiable love drives me to the task.'"

Scriptural Greatness

The *Tirumandiram* is one of the most important works related to yoga, tantra, Saiva Siddhanta philosophy and spirituality ever written (see the next page for a story of Saint Mular and how this book came to be). It is closely related to the *Saiva Agamas*, and often cited as an opus that summarizes them.

The book's first *tandiram*, or section, prepares the aspirant by defining the phi-

A yogi's treasure:

Ten volumes hold 3,000 years of yogic discipline as penned—more precisely, etched on palm leaves—by Saint Tirumular



HINDUISM TODAY

losophy of Saiva Siddhanta. In the second *tandiram*, creation and souls are explained, along with the five-fold nature of Lord Siva's actions. In the third, techniques for sadhana and yoga are laid out. In the fourth, mantras, yantras and *siddhis* are described and taught. In the fifth *tandiram*, the four margas (*charya*, *kriya*, *yoga* and *jnana*) are explained, along with four stages of liberation of the soul. In the sixth *tandiram*, advanced sadhanas that lead to *jnana* are explained. In the seventh, divine conduct is prescribed, which includes worship of the Sivalingam. In the eighth, high states of consciousness are elucidated; and, finally, in the ninth *tandiram*, the experiencing of Lord Siva is expounded and liberated souls studied.

Each *tandiram* takes up one volume of this collection. The tenth volume is comprised of a glossary, a selected bibliography, an index and an appendix containing two enlightening discourses on the nature of Saiva Siddhanta: whether it is ultimately monistic or dualistic. It is a discussion crucial to Saivites, the culmination of a centuries-long

A qualified translator: The erudite T.N. Ganapathy approached the task with reverence and some trepidation, leading a team as talented as himself

debate that questions the nature of the soul and whether it ultimately merges with Siva in *advaitic* union.

The publisher explains, "It has been a challenge to produce a translation that would not take sides in the important philosophical debate between Saiva Siddhantins [who are] realistic pluralists and those who see the *Tirumandiram* as an expression of the highest mystical states of consciousness accessible to the Yogi, [a stance called] monistic theism. The views of the two sides are in the appendix."

Is there a place in our fast-paced modern society for such a deep treatise? Is it meant only for yogis and scholars? Dr. Ganapathy addresses the question beautifully in his introduction: "If religion deals with ultimate Reality and society is a common system of ultimate values, then there must be a necessary connection between the two. To reveal this necessary connection is the purpose of the *Tirumandiram*." Dr. Ganapathy states that the *Tirumandiram*'s ontology (a word naming the investigation of the nature of being) "is based on the notion of the Absolute not as a person, but as a principle and value, an Absolute Freedom or a Great Aloneness, called *taṇi urra kēvalam* in Tirumular's words." It's a book about freedom, liberation, *moksa*, nirvana or *vettaveli*."

From its unmatched lofty platform, the *Tirumandiram* proceeds to give guidance on daily life, prescribing humility, ahimsa, restraint of one's desires, courage, control of the mind, cleanliness and the steadfast cultivation of a pure and unswerving love. What else could be more relevant to our times?

TIRUMANDIRAM, 10 VOLUMES, 3,766 PAGES. ORDERS OUTSIDE OF INDIA US\$100 PLUS A FLAT SHIPPING RATE OF US\$50; ORDERS IN INDIA RS. 4,400 PLUS ACTUAL SHIPPING FEES. TO ORDER VISIT WWW.BABAJIKRIYAYOGA.NET



Tirumantiram, Fountainhead of Saiva Siddhanta

An Inspired Talk by Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami

I want to introduce you to Saint Tirumular who is the very fountainhead of Saiva Siddhanta, and to his scripture, the *Tirumantiram*, considered the final authority on subtle matters of philosophy and theology in this tradition. In fact, it is said to contain the whole of Saiva Siddhanta. Saint Tirumular is a theologian of our faith, but not merely a theologian. He is also a *siddhar*, an accomplished yogi. Our Hindu scriptures come from such great men, who have attained to the deepest realizations through their sadhana and their devotion. When their awareness dwells in the superconscious states resident in all men but penetrated intentionally by only a few, and when they speak out from that state, we consider that it is not man himself who has thus spoken but the Divine through man. Saint Tirumular's words are valued as a divine message for mankind.

The *Tirumantiram* delves into the nature of God, man and the universe in its depths. It is a mystical book and a difficult book. The original text is written in metered verse, composed in the ancient Tamil language. Saint Tirumular is the first one to codify Saiva Siddhanta, the final conclusions, and the first one to use the term *Saiva Siddhanta*.

Saint Tirumular codified Saivism as he knew it. He recorded its tenets in concise and precise verse form, drawing upon his own realizations of the truths it contained. His work is not an intellectual construction, and it is not strictly a devotional canon either. It is based in yoga. It exalts and explains yoga as the kingly science leading man to knowledge of himself. Yet it contains theological doctrine and devotional hymns. It is the full expression of man's search, encompassing the soul, the intellect and the emotions.

Saint Tirumular's story begins more than two thousand years ago in the Himalayas. His guru, the sage Nandinatha, who was also Patanjali's guru, sent his disciple on mission to South India to spread the purest teachings to the people there.

Rishi Sundaranatha, which was his name before he was sent to the South, had to walk all the way. Along the way he halted near the village of Tiruvavaduthurai, where he found the body of a cowherd who had died in the fields. The milk cows were wandering around aimlessly, lamenting the death of their master whom they clearly loved. The sight moved rishi Sundaranatha deeply, inspiring him to relieve the anguish of the cows. Leaving his physical body hidden in a hollow log, he used his siddhis, or yogic powers, to enter and revive the lifeless body of the cowherd, Mular—that was his name. He comforted and cared for the cattle and led them back to the village. But upon returning to the fields he was unable to find his original physical body. He searched and searched, but it was not to be found. It had simply vanished!

The rishi was deeply perplexed, and he sat in meditation to come

to some understanding of these strange happenings. Through his spiritual insight he discerned that it was Lord Siva Himself who had taken his body, leaving him to live thereafter in the body of the Tamil cowherd. He took this to be Siva's message that he should keep the South Indian body and serve in that way.

He accepted it all as Siva's will. Of course, there were certain advantages. For one thing, he could now fluently speak the language and knew the customs of the South.

Saint Tirumular began his mission of establishing the purity of the Saivite path soon thereafter when he settled down near Chidambaram. It was there that he began composing the *Tirumantiram*. Legend has it that the sage retired to a cave where he would sit in samadhi for a full year without moving. At the end of each year he would break his meditation long enough to speak out a single Tamil verse giving the substance of that year's meditations. Each verse composed in this manner was just four lines long, but the wisdom each contained was boundless. He wrote over 3,000 verses in all. This may not be accurate by the calendar, but it is true to the spirit and quality of the *Tirumantiram*, which has within it the wisdom of three thousand years of meditation.

It takes a bit of meditation to understand the *Tirumantiram*; it cannot be fully realized by merely reading or studying from the books. But the verses of the *Tirumantiram* are understandable if you learn how to absorb them into yourself. They are important because they tell about what our religion believes about inner, spiritual matters—about the soul and the world and their relationship to Siva. It is very important to remember that what a person is taught to believe creates his or her attitudes toward others and toward the world and stimu-

lates or suppresses desire. Beliefs create attitudes.

You must all study the great scriptures of our religion. These divine utterances of the *siddhars* will enliven your own inner knowing. The *Tirumantiram* is similar to the *Tirukural* in many ways. You can teach them both to the children and apply their wisdom to everyday life. You can use them for guidance in times of trouble and confusion, and they will unerringly guide you along the right path. You can read them as hymns after sacred puja in your home shrine or in the temple precincts. Each verse can be used as a prayer, as a meditation, as a holy reminder of the great path that lies ahead.

Understanding it is a difficult work, but don't be discouraged by that. Just accept that it could easily take a lifetime, several lifetimes, to understand all that is contained in this scripture, that it is for those deep into their personal sadhana. It was given by the saint to those who fully knew of the *Vedas* and the *Agamas*, and to understand it you too will have to become more familiar with these other scriptures, slowly obtaining a greater background.

The *Tirumantiram* has been taken from the past and magically transported into the future. Enjoy it. Study it. Meditate upon it. Let it become a part of your inner life, of your understanding of God, man and world.

Rishi Tirumular's Mystical Well

Hotter than fire, cooler than water the Lord is;
His graciousness, none does understand;
To the worldly, He is far; but close to the loving ones;
More loving than the mother is He, with flowing locks.
Tandiram 1 Mandiram 8

Countless Gods pass away in regular succession;
The loving Lord with the three eyes alone is,
Eternal abode of grace He is; humans and Celestials
Know not that He is the most exalted one.
Tandiram 1 Mandiram 12

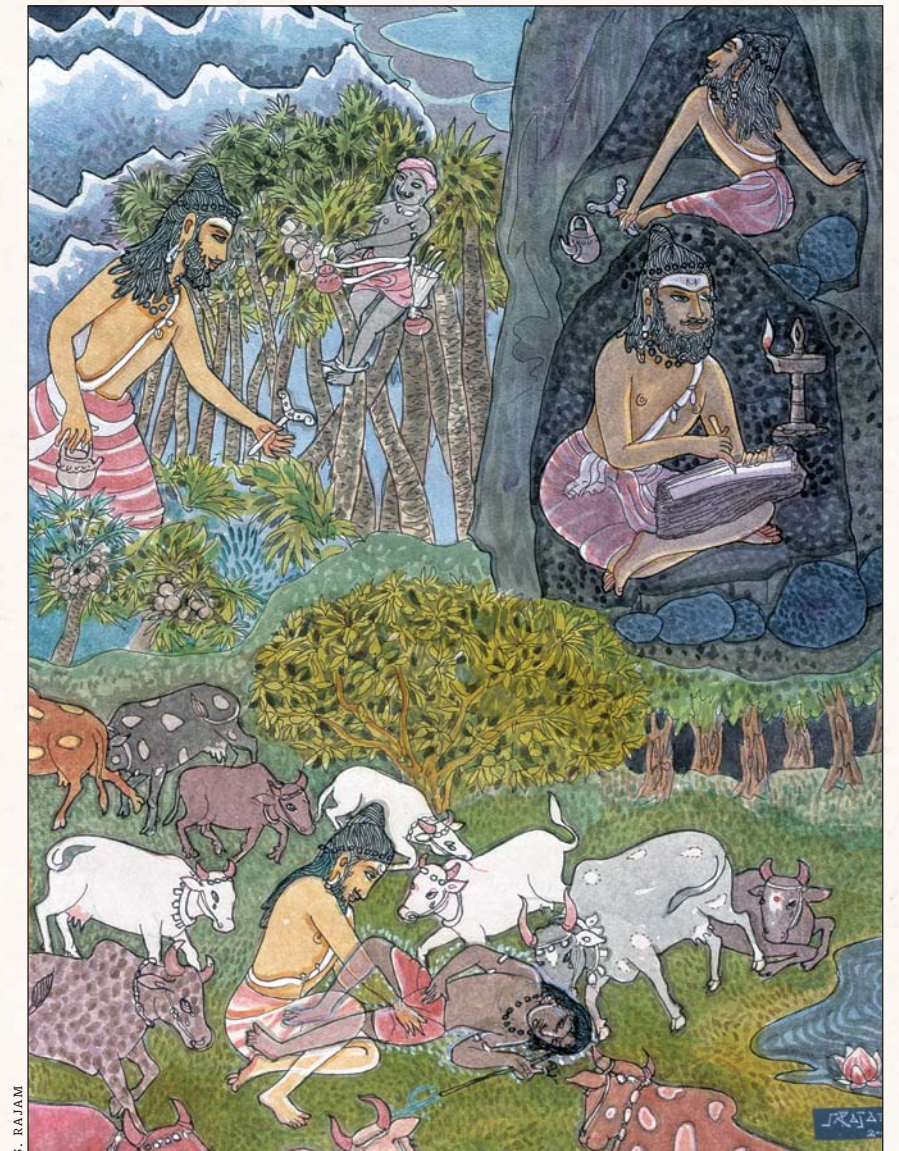
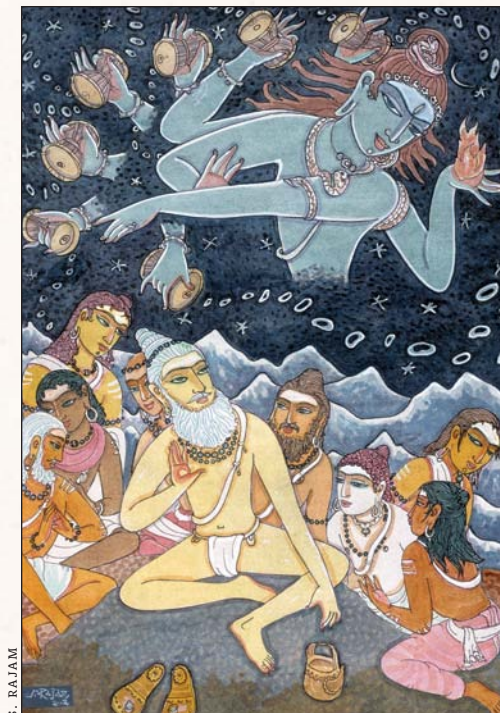
The compassionate One, the primal cause, He is everywhere;
Vishnu, abiding in the middle body, is He;
Brahma, the maker of the world, is He;
He is the world and the Holy Scripture.
Tandiram 2 Mandiram 391

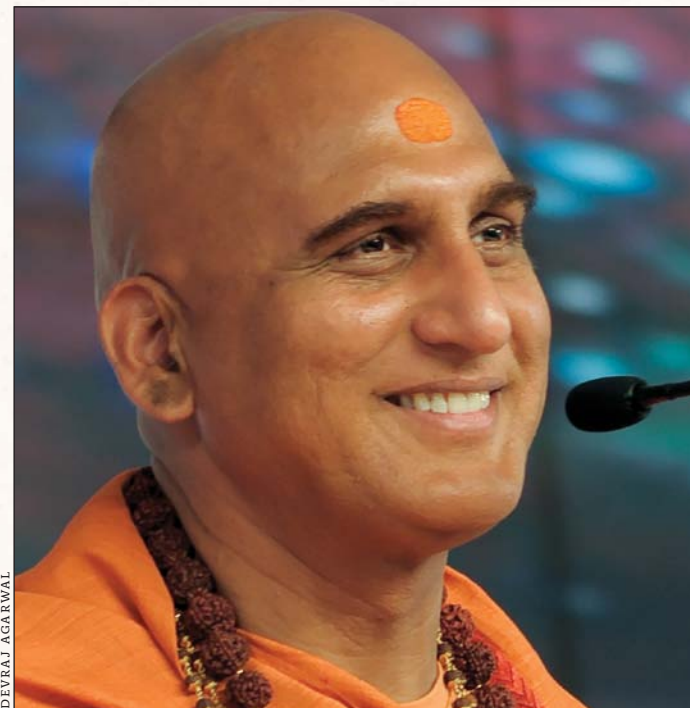
The Primal One created the five great elements;
The Primal One created many aeons;
The Primal One created innumerable Celestials;
Creating, the Primal One sustained them, too.
Tandiram 2 Mandiram 447

If samadhi, in which jiva becomes Siva, is materialized,
The mala ceases, the soul-ness departs
In the great world the defect-less body exists
For those, deprived of eight-fold taints, becoming one with Siva.
Tandiram 8 Mandiram 2320

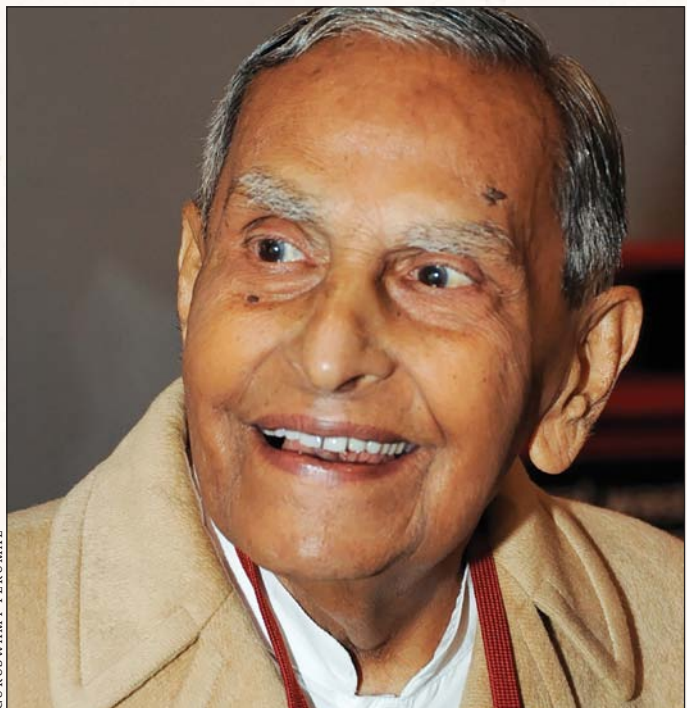
If one knows the light, the body is hidden;
If one constantly thinks of the perishing body, there is birth;
If one concentrates on the form of light, there is illumination;
If one melts in the light, He will become one with you.
Tandiram 9 Mandiram 2681

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Source of celestial revelations: (below) Nandinatha shares Lord Siva's revelations with his eight disciples; (right) one of them, Sundaranatha, traveled far south and, in a younger Tamil body, wrote the *Tirumantiram*





DEVRAJ AGARWAL



GURUSWAMY PERUMAL

WISDOM

A Little Fortright Talk Down Under

Hindu leaders speak to us in Melbourne about the financial crisis, gay marriage, yoga and religion

Last December, the publisher and two editors of *Hinduism Today* attended the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne, Australia. The event attracted the heads of many of the major Hindu religious organizations from around the globe. *Hinduism Today* seized the opportunity to sit down with those illustrious torchbearers. Here are excerpts from interviews with five of the leaders.

ON THE GLOBAL FINANCIAL CRISIS

Dada J.P. Vaswani, head of Sadhu Vaswani Mission, Pune: The teaching of Hinduism essentially is that you must live a simple life. All the great ones in the Hindu faith, from the days of Manu to the days of Gandhi, have been men of simplicity. Financial situations have not effected them at all. They live in eternity. The financial situation affects people who run after the world, but the great ones of Hinduism have not run after the world; the world has run after them. The true Hindu is unaffected by this financial situation. He knows the world always has ups and downs.

Swami Amarananda, head of Centre Vedantique, Geneva: It is due to the tremendous greed. *Manu Samhita* says that it is normal for a human being to have the propensity for enjoyment. But dharma has to be present. There will be chaos in society if

everyone wants to enjoy the maximum possible. Dharma is there to guide kama (pleasure), to limit it. *Udyog Parva* says that you should not try to bring about a situation which is disadvantageous for another person. Swami Vivekananda explained that whatever you do for yourself, in a selfish way, is adharma; whatever you do for others, that is dharma.

Swami Atmapriyananda, Vice Chancellor of Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, West Bengal: You have had so much money, enjoyed so much; now the present circumstances dictate that you enjoy a little less, have less money. The

crisis is in the mind. Be content with what you have. Swami Vivekananda once said that in the West you have experimented with how much a man can possess: "I will have this, I will go on acquiring, possessing, accumulating and enjoying." In India, in the East, we have experimented with how little a man can possess: "Do I need this shirt? No. Do I need these trousers? No." Thousands of people over the centuries have experimented with this. We have discovered we don't need anything at all. To keep the body and mind going, you may keep something, but don't think it is essential. The whole teaching in the *Gita* and in the Hindu scriptures: be unattached. This financial crisis you are talking about comes from being attached to something. When it is taken away, you feel there is a crisis. If you have nothing, there is no crisis at all. As Mahatma Gandhi once said, there's plenty for man's need but not plenty for man's greed. Nature will never deprive you of the most basic necessities if man is not greedy, vengeful and cruel.

Swami Avdheshanand, head of Juna Akhara, Haridwar: One of the main reasons for the current economic crisis in the West is the haphazard and lavish spending on military operations such as the manufacture of arms and ammunitions, nuclear power and the organization of wars as an expansionist policy of Western gov-



HINDUISM TODAY



GURUSWAMY PERUMAL

ernments. The enormous levels of military expenditures incurred incessantly over the last several years should be slashed drastically. Sincere efforts in this direction will bring their economies back on the right track. Secondly, there has been excessive spending on luxury items such as branded apparel and cosmetics, expensive homes, fancy cars, alcohol, cigarettes, drugs. Such spending habits beyond one's capacity to afford have resulted in the credit crunch. Indians, on the other hand, generally attempt to live within their means. The Indian philosophy has always been one of simple living and high thinking, which should be adopted by the West.

ON GAY MARRIAGE

Swami Mayatitananda, head of Mother Om Mission, North Carolina: From the perspective of ahimsa, we cannot afford to have a person be denied their human rights and civil rights, including their inalienable right to happiness, to comfort, to relationship, based on full acceptance of where they are on their own journey. We must have a nonjudgmental attitude towards couples of the same sex. Anything less is himsa. However, I do not feel marriage should be redefined. Marriage is an institution between the opposite sexes. The world's constitution defines marriage as that. We cannot serve the underdog at the expense of established communities. We have to serve the underdog without impinging on the accepted social structure of our society. Whatever the union is called does not matter. What is important is that the couples' civil rights have to be protected. The human spirit needs to be protected in the process of making laws. They should have the same rights as married couples. Why not? Someone is dying in a hospital: you can't go see them? You can't decide how they need to be buried? You can't say these people can only have those rights and those people can't. We cannot isolate, alienate and separate like that. There's a whole bundle of rights that go together. That bundle of rights, whether it is marriage or civil union, has to be observed.

Swami Amarananda: If persons of the same sex fall in love, and that is banned, you are trying to ban a sentiment, and that is immoral. If you look at marriage itself in Hinduism, you will find that many types of marriages have been mentioned. But it is evident that

Leaders in Melbourne: (left to right) Swami Avdheshanand, Dada J.P. Vaswani, Swami Mayatitananda, Swami Amarananda

there are some kinds of marriages which are tolerated—there is no approbation, but they are tolerated. The *Manu Samhita* definition of dharma includes a whole system of marriage that was conceived for the benefit of society. There are much bigger issues coming up in the future—bigger than this—for example, new methods of procreation, even cloning. The modern leaders of all religions must go to the foundation of ethics and do only those things whereby the welfare of society is guaranteed, stabilized; otherwise everyone will suffer. Everything should be judged from that angle. If gay couples give positive input to society—raise children to be contributing, ethically minded citizens—then it should be tolerated. As with men and women, loyalty to one partner is important.

Swami Atmapriyananda: I would answer from Swami Vivekananda's own words in which he says that a religion should not meddle in social matters at all. Social matters come up because of the dynamics of society. Religion shouldn't get directly involved in the "yes" or "no" because there is going to be change again. These are societal things which continuously keep changing, like politics. That's why Vivekananda forbade Ramakrishna Mission from getting into politics at all, because it is continuously changing. There is no end to it. So, in that sense, religion should not pronounce anything definite about this, but certain regulated principles of dharma based on the smriti shastras should be followed. I don't know exactly whether this is discussed in the smriti shastras, but Vivekananda said smriti shastra continues to be rewritten. Certain principles have come down over years of experimentation. Perhaps they said this kind of a tendency has to be regulated and sublimated. Thus, one good answer could be the principle of sublimation: you sublimate your instinct, take it to that higher channel from where you will be able to decide what is right and what is wrong.

Dada J.P. Vaswani: Gay marriage is something unnatural. That's what I think. But I am not qualified to answer because I have not studied the subject.



Swami Avdheshanand: Homosexuality is an unnatural way of life.

ON YOGA'S RELATIONSHIP TO HINDUISM

Dada J.P. Vaswani: Yoga is one of the *shad darshanas* (six philosophies). It is essentially Hindu. Yoga is a gift of Hinduism to the nations. Hinduism makes a gift of it willingly! Just as people in China have Tai Chi, we don't say that is part of Hinduism. That is not part of Hinduism. Yoga is part of Hinduism, an essential part. All humanity must follow the yamas and the niyamas. Because humanity has not, it has to pay a heavy price. If yoga, the yamas and niyamas, were followed, we wouldn't have come to be in the condition we are in. Yoga is born out of the insight of the great rishis. It is not just bodily exercises, but yes, hatha yoga, too, is essentially Hindu.

Swami Avdheshanand: Patanjali was born in India. Yoga is one of the *shad darshanas*. So, of course, yoga is a part of Hinduism. But not the yoga aerobics, dancing yoga, laughing yoga, clapping yoga, smile yoga, hot yoga, yoga for beauty, yoga for the wrinkleless face. Today, instead of "the whole world is a family," the whole world is a market, and everything is a product that must be patented, sold, marketed. What nonsense. It's a nuisance to yoga. Yoga is for everyone. Yoga is a way to the Almighty. Yoga means to know the Supreme Being, who is the Creator, who is omnipresent. But ashtanga yoga is an ancient part of Hinduism. Nobody can deny it.

Swami Amarananda: First of all, by *yoga*, ordinarily the West means hatha yoga. In hatha yoga there may be elements of Hindu religion, but in the West normally it is catered in such a way that it is dogma neutral. The pope and the Muslim religious communities are worried because if someone performs yoga and thinks it is beneficial, they will thereby develop some respect, admiration and sympathy for the Hindu religion. They think that is dangerous, that people will go deeper in their explorations. They don't want their followers to peep over the fence, but remain within the fold. Whether they ban it or not, people will still do it, because they perceive the positive results of it.

Swami Atmapriyananda: Suppose you have a doctrine from physics or chemistry and it has been discovered at a particular place and time. Would you say that Einstein's relativity theory is specifically a Jewish or American tradition? No, because it is universal; science is universal. In exactly the same way, all the great masters of Hinduism or any other religion brought forth the core principles that are always universal. Yoga emanated from the Hindu tradition, but it is always universal. The universalization of certain fundamental principles is the beauty of the Sanatana Dharma. Now, because yoga has become very popular, there is a tremendous reaction by those who say there is a subtle conversion going on—people are getting converted to yoga. That would be like saying if you are a biologist, and I introduce certain principles of physics to you that you find fascinating, I am converting you to be a physicist. There is

no such conversion going on. Scientists don't have this problem. If yoga is acceptable universally, and it benefits humanity, why not? Hinduism is not threatened—that's the beauty—because it assimilates. But the moment some people see it assimilate, they feel threatened.

ON THE CHALLENGES HINDUISM FACES

Swami Amarananda: What is most important in Hinduism is not even the holy books, it is the leading acharyas. If the Hindu population has some perception that this or that person is an accomplished being, they will listen to him. The problem, in my opinion, is that most of the gurus who are highly mediatised have an exaggerated notion about their importance in society—they are pontifical, consider themselves to be great gurus. One of the tests of spirituality is self-effacement. If you do not have humility—you may have great talent, you may be a scholar—you are not a man of spirituality. Correct behavior is important. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that it is not sufficient that you observe a holy person only during the daytime. Observe him also during the night and test that person as a money changer tests his coin. There are great holy men in India, and thousands of young people are flocking to India each year in search of a guru, but they are usually trapped by the gurus who are making the big headlines, gurus who generally will not be able to give them what they are looking for. Hinduism is not a structured religion, so there is no control. I have seen, for example, young persons who are in the order two or three years come to the West, and suddenly they have the Paramahansa title at the beginning of their name.



Voice of Dharma: Swami Atmapriyananda of RK Mission

Swami Mayatitananda: We have to renovate our thinking.

We have to renovate our focus. There's work to be done. Those of us who call ourselves leaders really have to put the common goal before our individual differences and address the social issues in our communities. No Hindu spiritual leader ever took an oath to go and collect part of the market share. This is not our goal. The goal is to influence people with certain teachings. But we are out there very much like a business getting more share of the market. This compromises the work that needs to be done in the trenches, at the grass-roots level. Those organizations that have humongous outreach programs and are doing so much, how wonderful it would be if the leaders could pull together like we are forced to do during a natural calamity. Why do we need a national calamity to bring us together and serve the common good?

Swami Avdheshanand: The greatest challenge to Hinduism in the next two decades is to analyze and make efforts to uproot the menace of rising terrorism flowing in from the neighboring countries and getting settled in this country. There has to be a constant dialogue amongst all the religious heads for maintaining communal harmony, which is essential for the stability of all religions.



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VOLUNTEER’S TALE OF TWO VISITS TO A MALAYSIAN ORPHANAGE



Dayavati (in blue) with ashram founder Santha Devi (in orange) and children at the orphanage

On December 26, 2004, American Hindu Dayavati Murugan woke up in her Kuala Lumpur hotel in Malaysia to a tsunami report on CNN. One of the worst natural disasters in recorded history had occurred, with 230,000 people killed in eleven countries bordering the Indian Ocean. Malaysia, shielded by the Island of Sumatra, reported only 68 deaths from the earthquake-driven waves, three of them in Perak, Dayavati’s destination. The next day she rode a bus five hours to Sitiawan, Perak, a city of some 100,000 and home to the Manjung Orphanage, founded in 1996 to house three siblings abandoned by their parents. It is the area’s only Hindu orphanage.

“There were about thirty boys and girls living there in 2004, some very young,” she said. “I loved the place.” She lived with the girls in the upstairs dormitory in the two-story building which also housed the kitchen, dining room and community hall. “I established a wonderful connection with the children,” she added, describing her volunteer work, leading pujas and bhajans and explaining Hindu teachings to the young residents during her two-week stay. “After coming back to the US, I received cards and letters from them over the next three years.”

When Dayavati returned in December of 2007, the orphanage—local residents refer to it as “the ashram”—had changed. In 2004 the ashram had already exceeded its 25-resident capacity. Now she found a population of 50, most of them pre-teenage. The older girls had to keep order, and some resorted to caning. Pressing needs included increased space, more adult staff and discipline consistent with the Hindu commitment to nonviolence.

This time Dayavati stayed a month, living in a home across the alley from the ashram. “All the children were crammed into the main building, with girls upstairs and the boys sleeping on mats on the cement floor in the dining room downstairs. Housing fifty children, the facilities were over-used and showed it.” More paid staff was needed. “The cook was the only adult living with the children. One person cannot keep control in those conditions,” she felt. “The director agreed.” Dayavati returned home concerned: “Most of the children are not literally orphans. They come from troubled homes. As their numbers grew, they needed more care than the small staff could give.”

Since her 2007 visit, things have changed for the better, and the number of children has grown to 54. The ashram has acquired a four-bedroom, two-bath house across the alley, moved the boys there under the live-in supervision of a retired estate caretaker, and finally cleared title to an empty lot nearby, gifted for a new facility. The classes she started on the yamas and niyamas—the 20 ethical restraints and observances—have continued. “It warms my heart. They’ve also hired tutors for the children. That’s huge. Overcrowding made studying difficult and some residents were dropping out of school.” She is also encouraged that the ashram now practices Positive Discipline, a firm but nonviolent style of child-rearing advocated worldwide by Gurudeva.

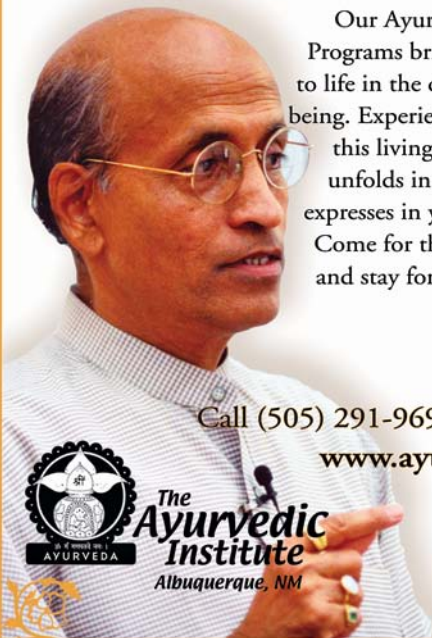
“I was absolutely thrilled when Santha Devi, one of the ashram founders, told me these things were happening,” Dayavati said. “Santha is also teaching the children handicrafts, cooking and baking.” The Sitiawan community gives food to the ashram, she said. “Local farmers bring fresh produce, and many local Hindu families celebrate birthdays and anniversaries by providing a nice meal for the children or taking them on an outing to the beach or park.”

She hopes readers can contribute US\$40 for a new set of school clothes to a Manjung child. The Manjung Hindu Sabha Orphanage Fund is Hindu Heritage Endowment fund #54. Donate to the fund at www.hheonline.org.

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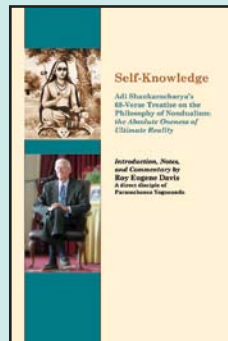
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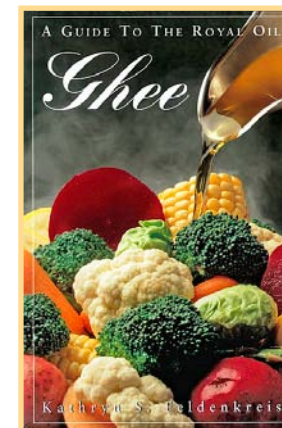
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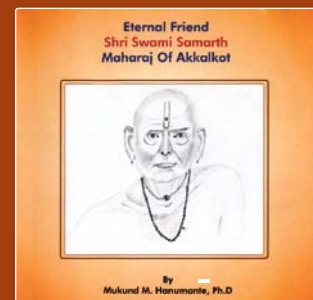
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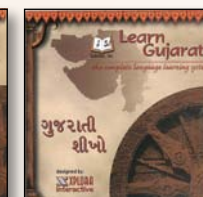
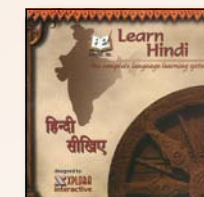
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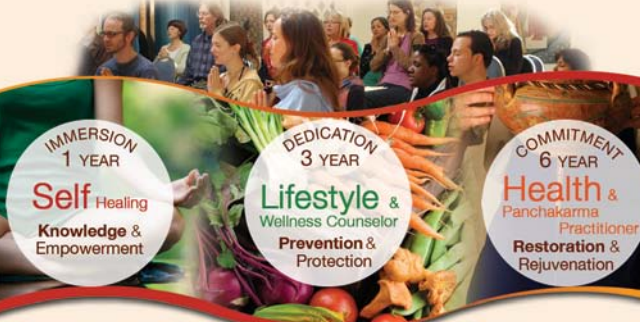
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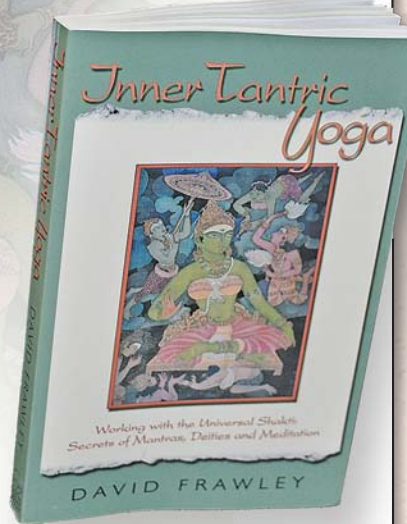
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April	1 - 4	Atlanta, GA
	9 - 13	Dallas, TX
	23 - 25	Austin, TX
	27	El Paso, TX
	29 - 30	Tucson, AZ
May	1 - 2	Tucson, AZ
	4 - 5	Sedona, AZ
	7 - 11	Los Angeles, CA
	13 - 16	San Francisco Bay Area
	20 - 23	Seattle, WA
	24 - 26	Portland, OR
June	3 - 6	Boulder, CO
	7	Denver, CO
	14 - 17	Fairfield, IA
	18 - 20	Chicago, IL
	22	Cincinnati, OH
	24 - 27	Columbus, OH
	27 - 29	Cleveland, OH
July	1 - 2	Toronto, Ontario
	4 - 5	Woodstock, NY
	7 - 11	Washington, DC
	12 - 13	Philadelphia, PA
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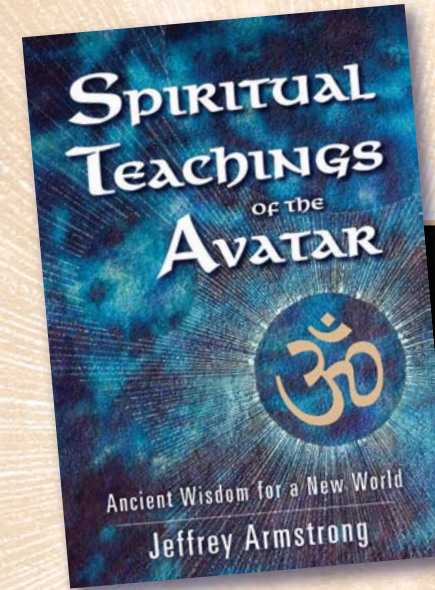
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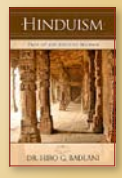


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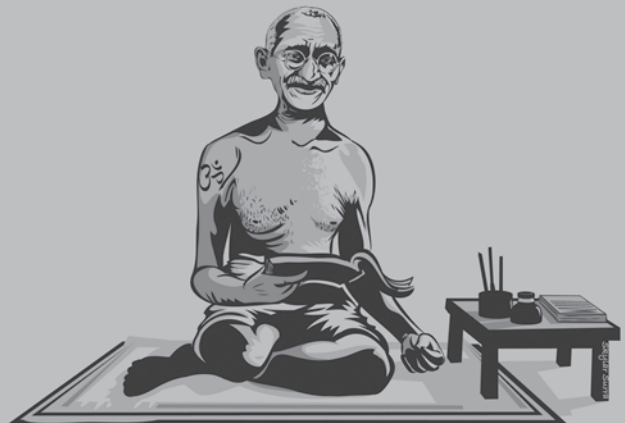


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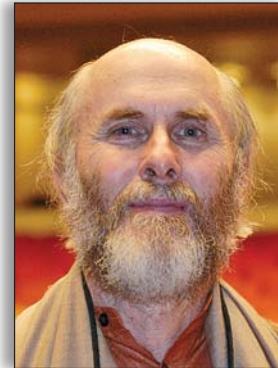
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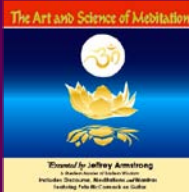
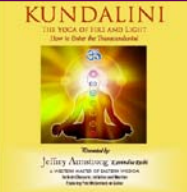
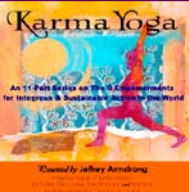
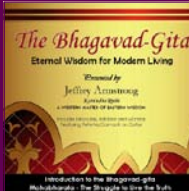
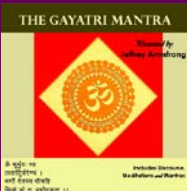



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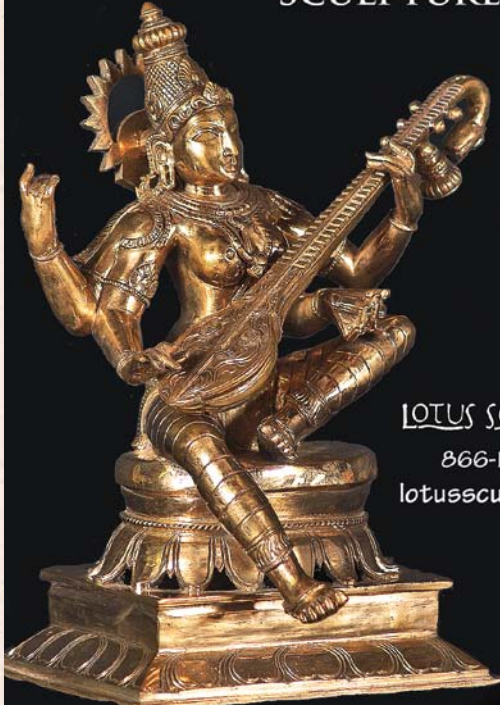
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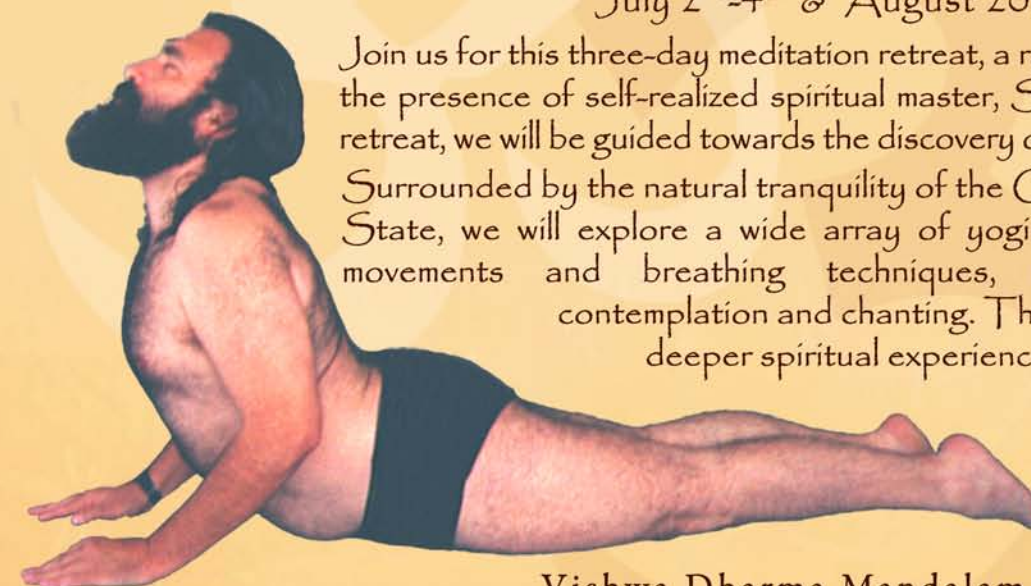
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IT BEGAN IN 2007 WHEN OUR PUBLISHER Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami said it was time to upgrade the HINDUISM TODAY website and move into the Web 2.0 world, complete with blogs, Twitter and video. We hired a professional web designer, adopted a high-tech content management system and went to work. Finally after a year and a half of effort, and a lot of expense, we retired our trusty 15-year-old site in June 2009. We are now colorful and modern, with content better organized for easier access. New features include a video channel, direct PDF downloads, comments

from Hindu Press International and an area focused on our book, *What Is Hinduism?* Each quarter the home page fills with brand new material from the current issue.

Another giant step was to encompass video production sufficiently to launch a HINDUISM TODAY YouTube Channel. See www.youtube.com/hinduismtodayvideos. Viewers get to see Satguru Bodhinatha Veylanswami read his Publisher's Desk editorial on screen, and each quarter our editor-in-chief serves up a delightful 10-minute video summary of the new issue. Our video camera travels with us now; footage of Hindus and sacred

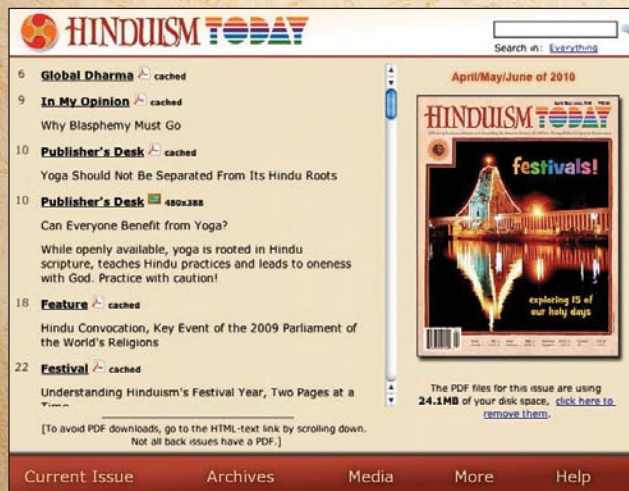


YouTube of Literature: Scribd is a popular channel for people who love to read on their computer. Here you can find HINDUISM TODAY in brilliant full color in the iPaper format. Go full screen to easily scroll through issues dating back almost 25 years. See: www.scribd.com/hinduism%20today

places far and wide is slowly building up on our YouTube channel. The movies are also embedded into the website.

We are also taking advantage of other on-line channels, including Scribd (see above), where fans can read all the back issues.

On the social network side, we opened a Twitter account, @HinduismToday, and soon you'll be able to find us on Facebook. It's been a real quantum leap!



Hinduism Today Navigator

FOR DEDICATED READERS, RESEARCHERS AND THOSE IN FAR OFF lands who cannot subscribe, our desktop client PDF manager has been a Godsend. Now it is reincarnated as the spectacular *Hinduism Today Navigator*. The new version continues its original service: it automatically downloads PDFs of the magazine to your computer, keeps them neatly arranged in a digital library and provides you with an accessible, orderly interface to all past issues. In response to requests for search and readability offline, we now include past articles dating back to 1985 in Web format. A quick and complete search returns a list of articles that you can read as text. When you are online, audio and video features are also available. It is a complete experience without all the Web's usual noise, and it is free. Go to our site, choose "Navigator" from the menus and dive deep into the ocean of HINDUISM TODAY. We hope you enjoy it, and we welcome your feedback!